

The Ghost of Warborough Hall

by TapestryClouds

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Summary: ****ON HIATUS**** A Gothic tale that follows the story of the enigmatic Astrid Hofferson, lady of Warborough Hall. What secrets is Warborough Hall keeping within its walls? AU, Hiccstrid

1. Prologue

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_There should be a sacrifice at the beginning of winter for a good year, and in the middle of winter for a good crop, the third in summer day, that was the sacrifice for victory."_

â€" Ynglinga Saga, 1225

* * *

><p>PROLOGUE

Hiccup gently took Astrid's hands. "Come with me."

Astrid stared at him. "Iâ€|." She glanced at her Nadder behind Hiccup, a dark silhouette against the bright background. Stormfly trilled at her. Astrid swallowed and looked back at the green-eyed man in front of her. "Hiccup, Iâ€|" She trailed off again. Should she come with him, or stay here and perhaps never see him again?

"Please Astrid," he said, almost half pleading. He watched as myriad emotions flitted across her face, and it almost pained him to ask her to take a leap of faith and make this decision right here, right now. He felt so selfish, but he needed her. He needed her for her strategic mind. For her strength. She was his support. And he needed her becauseâ€| becauseâ€|

He needed her with his every being.

When she did not reply, he smiled sadly and brought her hands up to his lips and kissed them. "I understand, Astrid." He kissed her forehead, then her nose, before tilting her chin to kiss her lips. It was a light, chaste kiss, but Astrid found herself leaning forwards when he finally pulled away. "I hope we'll see each other again. But if I don't come back, know that Iâ€¦ I love you."

Hiccup blushed as he smiled at her before he stepped away and walked towards the blinding light. Astrid was so torn: she wanted to follow him, but she was afraid of making the wrong choice. She looked behind her and saw a pair of blue eyes â€" her same blue eyes. They were urging her on. Urging her to follow Hiccup.

"Will it be the right decision?" She asked.

"You won't know until you take this step," was the reply.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And don't worry. I will still be here when you come back."

Astrid closed her eyes. "Thank you. Thank you so much." She smiled before she turned and ran after Hiccup. Calling after him. Hiccup turned around and caught her in his arms in surprise. She whispered in his ear, and he murmured a reply upon her hair. They were soon lost to the light, and after a while the light faded, and midnight enveloped the winter woods once again.

The pair of blue eyes had followed this entire exchange for as long they can. These eyes belonged to a ghost. And, like the fate of many ghosts, she was once again alone. She would miss her, but a promise was a promise. She would wait for her, for as long as she could, even if it means waiting until the end of time. She let go of a breath that she did not realise she was holding and closed her eyes.

I am Astrid Hofferson.

She sobbed up to the night sky and collapsed in the snow.

* * *

><p>My name is Ruffnut Thorston. Yes, that's my real name, and yes I know it's weird, but that's what you get for being the unholy offspring of a father who thought he was a rock god, and a mother who was crazy about nuts. But it's much better than my twin brother's name. His name's Tuffnut. You can just imagine the life we led in high school, but that's ok. 'Cause we enjoy fist fights. A lot.<p>

I looked at myself in the mirror and frowned, pulling the bobby pins from my hair and shaking the curls out. I looked like such a _girl_. I hated looking like a girl. I am more at home outside, in the rain and in the mud, than in formal events where the glitterati with the fake boobs and fake pouts abounded. That is why I just ran out of some fancy pants charity dinner the first chance I got and went straight home.

It was only eight o'clock.

I grimaced at my reflection and walked out of the bathroom. I

stumbled into my bedroom and threw myself face down in the mattress with a groan.

My profession? I'm a biography writer, and I know you're asking how in God's bloody green Earth I became something that required me to read. I used to hate reading with a passion, but then again, I also used to like acting dumb with my brother "although he is naturally dumb - but something happened in my life that changed all that. So I became a writer, but I don't have enough imagination, or patience, or drive to be a creative writer. I've tried, believe me, but I enjoy writing about dead people more.

The dead don't care if I divulge scandalous stuff about their lives.

Oh, I am by no means famous or anything. Biographers don't tend to get much screen time (go on, why don't you try and name a few of us who are still alive), and that's perfectly fine with me. Not famous, but my works have generated enough interest to be invited to the silicone booby-trap parties that my publishing house throws every now and then.

Suddenly remembering that my smelly brother rang me earlier that day to catch up in a fast food restaurant, I scrambled off my bed and threw on a pair of jeans and a jumper before bounding out the door. I walked past the rows of mailboxes in my apartment building and found a stack of letters in mine. I yanked them out and quickly flicked through them. Bills. Bank statements. Bills. A letter from my publisher. More bills. And

I stopped flicking as I stared at a white envelope with my address handwritten at the back in beautiful cursive. I turned it over to see who it was from, but found the front blank. The envelope itself had a stylised "H" embossed in the back. Who could this be from?

I shoved the other letters back in the mailbox and left the building. I opened the mysterious letter as I walked down the streets and immediately flicked to the last page, down to where the writer would have signed their name, and I nearly stumbled.

This letter was from the most famous English author of this century.

Astrid Hofferson.

The letter was from the great Astrid Hofferson! The same woman who wrote numerous novels that rivalled the greatest books in popularity. The mysterious Astrid: never married, never had children, and as far as anyone knew, never been in love. And, despite her popularity, she was a woman whose life was something of an enigma. Naturally, her life intrigued me. When she's dead, I'd definitely write her biography.

Yeah, she's on my hit list.

There could have only be one reason why she wrote to me. Everyone knew that she was old, sick, and dying. Could it be that she wanted me as her biographer? I gathered my wits and started walking again. Best to read what she had to say first before I starting jumping to conclusions. The world dissolved around me as I read the contents of

that letter under the alternating lights of the shopfronts I walked past. The letter was as haughty as it was inviting, as regal as it was good-natured. It was, no doubt, Astrid in written form.

This was what she wrote:

"Miss Thorston,

"I have never authorised any of the many biographies about me, nor have I thought about commissioning one. After all, who better to write one's story than oneself? But I realised that there are certain events in my life that I could not write, not because I am unable to, not because I have cried wolf far too many times for people to believe me â€" although that is true as well - but because my story is simply too incredible to be true.

"No doubt you are wondering why I chose you, a complete stranger, to write about the life of another stranger.

"I recently did an interview for a dull lifestyle magazine. I know that everybody is anticipating my death soon, and this particular interviewer thought that she will be the one I will finally reveal my real story to before I die.

"Let me explain before I continue. For my own reasons, the stories I had claimed were my real stories were all in fact - and just like my novels - fiction. And you must already know this since I have not been consistent in my narrative in the past. I leave enough darkness to keep the prying eyes from delving in too deep. I enjoy doing these story-telling interviews. They are like writing the novels that so many in the world seem to love, but I have to be quicker and lighter on my feet. Sometimes, the clever ones will find a hole in my plot, or sometimes I will let slip a truth amidst the lies, and so I try to mend the damage quickly, enticing them with a side-story until they forget about the error that would have been my undoing.

"This particular interviewer asked me if the story I just told her â€" and a shining remnant of a lie it was, I must say - was the real one. I have replied that truth is what we believe them to be. I have simply given the masses many truths â€" it was up to them to figure out which one to believe in.

"But, in the back of my mind, at the conclusion of each of the stories that I write and at the end of each interview I give, there is a man waiting patiently behind the hundreds of other characters in my head. He was a man I once knew, whose green-eyes had been piercing through the twilight of my years with increasing intensity. I see a woman next to him with blonde hair and blue eyes â€" so like me when I was younger. They are waiting for me to speak the most important truths that would bring them back to life. Not these half-truths that I had been weaving all my life.

"Miss Thorston, I wish to invite you to be my biographer. You may stay in Warborough Hall for as long as my story allows. I will arrange for someone to meet you outside Wellingham Station on 28 September at half-past eight in the morning. You must not be late.

"Astrid Hofferson""

My feet stopped in front of the fast food restaurant, but I was still lost within Astrid Hofferson's letter. The letter was a summons. That much was clear by the commanding way she ended her letter. But I could not have refused her even if I wanted to. She already had me hooked. I needed to know the truth that this famous stranger was finally willing to tell. And most importantly, I wanted to know who the man with the green eyes was.

Astrid Hofferson had never been in love?

What a load of bollocks! The stories were all wrong: Astrid Hofferson had _been _in love, and by the sounds of it, she was in love still.

I groaned when I realised that the 28th of September was tomorrow. She was not giving me enough time to do my research. I was _positive _she made sure I received the letter today, the slimy old fox!

I slipped the letter into my jeans pocket and entered the grease joint. I searched for my brother's familiar face and spotted him immediately, sitting with that goofy expression plastered across his mug. No, not that one with the black hair. That smelly one with the long face, right there. I shoved his face in the table before sitting opposite him.

He righted himself. "Ew, Ruff, you look like a girl."

"Dumbass, that's because I am one."

My brother used to have dreadlocks until he decided to join the Navy. And on that fateful day when he signed upâ€¦ wellâ€¦ let's just say I had never seen a grown man look so sad at a disgusting mass of hair on the floor since he had it cut to a cueball, and I have never laughed so hard in my life. The Navy ship he was travelling with was currently docked somewhere nearby for a few days, and so he decided to visit some friends around here. And because I was also here, he decided to visit me too. As an afterthought.

He pushed a tray laden with a burger and fries and a cup of Coke towards me, and I instantly fell upon it.

"Thanks!" I said through a mouthful of food. "I'm starving."

He looked around, bored. "Yeah, yeah. You owe me for this, you know."

"Are you serious? I buy your food all the time-"

"Not for the food, butt-chin. I could have been hanging out with my friends tonight, but instead I'm hanging out with you. Ugh!" He gagged.

"Hey stupid, you were the one who asked me to meet you here."

He opened his mouth, but then shut it again. "Oh yeah."

I rolled my eyes. "So when are you leaving again?"

"In two days' time."

"Good, I'll be away too, up in Warborough Hall, in the country, for god knows how long."

"What are you doing in that crypt of a place?"

I shrugged. "I dunnoâ€¦ maybe I'm just interviewing the greatest literary figure of this century!" I excitedly exclaimed.

He looked blankly at me. "Who?"

I grinned. "Astrid Hofferson, you ning nong."

"What? That old crone?" He snorted. "She's long overdue to meet her maker. Too bad she wouldn't let up, eh? Then you'll be free to write about her. You should just knock her head off while you're there. What's her name again? Batstrid?"

"_Astrid_ Hofferson," I corrected him. "But that's not a bad idea at allâ€¦"

"Of course it's not. So, have you ever even met her?"

I scowled. "No, I almost did though, once. She dropped by my publishing house's officeâ€¦ showed up for a little while before she had to leave. She looked so frail from afar though. I mean, I was also disappointed I didn't get to even shake hands with her or something..."

Tuffnut grumbled. "I would never understand why you like her so much."

"I connect with her man! She's a tough woman â€" like me â€" and she's a fighter â€" like me. But _unlike_ me, her literary works are loved and have been quoted again and again by, well, practically everyone! Not only that, did you know that they have dubbed her the greatest author of this century and â€" "

"Stoopppp!" Tuff plugged his fingers in his ears. "You sound so much like Fishlegs, I could die of geekery overdose."

I sniffed at him regally. "You don't know what you're missing."

"You used to swear that you'd never read while you're still alive."

I froze, and the smirk immediately disappeared from his face when he realised what he had just said. "_Don't go there_." I hissed, "_You know __**why**__." _He looked at me sadly, a silent apology in his eyes.

I decided to change topics. "Besides, I used to also swear I would never kiss boys."

He made a face. "You're so gross."

I reached forward and jabbed him in the arm.

"Ow! Yeah! Again! I wanna see stars!"

I punched him harder.

"You sissy. I said I wanna see â€" "

A right hook to the cheek got him looking cross-eyed. I cackled as he shook his head to clear it.

"Great hook! You need to watch your elbows though, they're too high."

"Damn!" I muttered, but I grinned at him. That's what I liked about my brother: he volunteered to be my punchbag, while teaching me how to fight and be tough, and aggravated me so I could know exactly how to respond to assholes.

He grinned back at me before he shoved my face away. "Hurry up with your food, ugly. I wanna go home."

That night, as I sat on my suitcase to shut it, I realised that I was really going to miss my twin's stupid face and cool ideas. This year was going to be another one of those Christmases where I wouldn't be able to hang out with him. Although we usually catch up over the Internet, I was almost 100 percent sure Miss Hofferson will have no Internet connection installed in Warborough Hall, and I was 100 percent sure there will be no mobile signal either.

I yanked the zipper hard, finally managing to shut the suitcase. I sighed. Well, at least Miss Hofferson would provide me with a welcome distraction.

From what I'd heard, she was quite the firecracker. I liked firecrackers.

In fact, I liked anything that explodes.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

Prologue done! This fic is loosely based on The Thirteenth Tale by Diane Setterfield in setting and style, but not quite as serious in tone since Ruffnut is no Margaret Lea :)

So, what did you guys think? How's the pacing? Was it too long? Not long enough? Was it confusing? Not enough Hiccstrid? The Hiccstrid feels will come don't worry :)

And before you ask "why is Ruffnut a biographer when she hates reading", I just want to say: Hold your damn horses! All will be revealed later.

Edit 6/5/2013: Edited due to the grammar mistakes. Thanks **Silver Wings.X** for pointing them out :)

****Next chapter****: In which Ruffnut travels to Warborough Hall. Chapter 1 is just writing itself, and it's one monster of a chapter let me tell you (it's currently at 6,000+ words and it's not even finished yet! I will probably have to split it in twoâ€| maybe even threeâ€|)

2. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 1

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_One must never let go before having managed to set down one's first impressions."_

â€" _Pierre Bonnard, 1867-1947_

* * *

><p>ARC ONE - DESTINY

****CHAPTER ONE:****

As per Miss Hofferson's instructions, I got off at Wellingham Station the following morning, although not quite at half past eight (on the dot) as she requested but that was hardly my fault â€" the train was delayed! I was only fifteen minutes off anyway, so I did not think it would have mattered much.

I looked around when I walked outside the station, thinking that somebody was there waiting for me, perhaps even holding up a cardboard sign with my name on it or something, but found nobody carrying such a thing. In fact, the only people I could see were the station master, an old man in a tweed jacket he was smoking with, and a woman with a pram waiting for the next train.

I clenched my teeth and sat on my luggage, hands upon my chin, boredom already settling in. I had agreed to stay in the country for an indefinite period of time, yet my sanity was already being tested within minutes of setting foot here.

"I gather you are Miss Thorston?"

The voice came out of nowhere and so unexpectedly that I nearly jumped out of my skin. I stood up and whirled around, my hand already pulled back in a fist, and found the old man in the tweed jacket cringing, both hands up in the air in a sign of peace.

"Whoah, easy there girl. Didn't mean to scare you like that."

I slowly let out a breath. "Well, you shouldn't sneak up on people like that. I could have punched you and sent your face flying all the way to Antarctica."

"Sorry, lass." He chuckled. He then took his cap off and swept me a low bow. "The name's Paul. I was sent by Miss Hofferson to bring you safely to Warborough Hall. Although I hope you do not mind me saying this, but you're late."

"Only by fifteen minutes," I said defensively.

"You could have caught the earlier train."

"I could have what? Sweet Jesus ofâ€|"

"I do beg your pardon, Miss Thorston, I meant no offence. However, youâ€| do realise who you are working for right?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Astrid Hofferson, yeah. So what?"

He lifted my huge luggage with a bit of trouble, and when I made to grab it back from him he shook his head and clicked his tongue. I shrugged at him, not really caring either way. If he wanted to break his back carrying that monster then so be it.

We started walking towards a car parked behind a couple of cabs. "My dear lass," he wheezed. "When my mistress says you must not be late, you must obey. Because, wellâ€¦ You do know she is dying, right? _And, _well, she does not like to be kept waiting," he added under his breath.

"Oh?"

"Oh." He confirmed with a twinkle to his blue eyes. "So come, come. Let us not keep The Lady waiting for much longer." He opened the door for me.

"Why so fancy," I muttered as I got in the car, and when Paul finally stuffed my luggage at the back and seated himself in the driver's seat, I asked: "Who does she think she is? The Queen?"

He chuckled as he drove. "No lass, she is so much more. She is the last of the Hoffersons."

I looked at him blankly. "And that's supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, perhaps not. But this is what I know: She is the last of her kind, the last with her specialty, her skills. She has no children to carry on the legacy after she's gone."

"And that gives herâ€¦ the right to ask everyone to do her bidding to the T? Sounds to me like she thrives on people's pity."

"No, my dear, you misunderstand. It is not what she _is _that make people respect her, but what she has done, what she has become, what she has come to representâ€¦ what it means to be the _last_. _That_ is why she commands our respect."

I admit I really didn't see the logic, but then a thought came to me. I looked at him closely. "Paulâ€¦ were you ever in love with her?"

"Ever in love with her?" He sputtered, before he started laughing. "Dear lord, no. She is so old! I have served her family since I was but a boy helping the gardener, and she already a woman who had turned down many a marriage proposal. I did love her as an older sister, yes. But I did not love her likeâ€¦ that! That kind of love is reserved only for my Eliza â€” my beautiful wife."

I mentally slapped myself. Of course this man was not the man Astrid had fallen for. Paul had blue eyes, not the green that she described in her letter. I turned my head to the window and watched the blur of sheep and fields go past. I guess the mystery of the green-eyed man will remain a mystery. For now.

After a while we turned left to a narrow dirt road and, like magic, Warborough Hall was suddenly visible in the distance. Hiding behind a

mass of trees ("The park," Paul said proudly, "we still keep deer there.") was a building that boasted of past grandeur. After another while longer we finally arrived at the gates, and Paul got out of the car to open it himself. I briefly wondered where the rest of Miss Hofferson's staff was.

"Hope you don't think us rude, my dear, but we will be entering from the kitchen," Paul said as he drove around the back slowly. "There are workmen fixing the front door â€" it was broken off its hinges yesterday."

"No way, those huge doors? How did it get broken?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. Between you and me, though, I think it was grumpy Molly â€" that's Missus Parsons to you, mind, and you make sure you don't call her Molly. She only allows The Lady to call her that, the rest of us aren't worthy enough. She's the housekeeper, you see, and a more severe woman you've never met."

He parked the car and I jumped out of my seat, itching to get on with this project. A woman in a plain brown jacket and brown skirt walked out of the wide kitchen doors, the brown eyes behind her glasses narrowing at me, her hair in a simple, neat bun at the nape of her neck.

"Ah, speak of the devil," Paul whispered behind me as he tugged my luggage free from the backseat.

"Miss Thorston," she said. "Welcome to Warborough Hall,"

"Thanks," I grinned and extended my hand. She looked at it for a moment before shaking the tips of my fingers. "And you must be Missus Parsons. I've heard so much about you."

Paul chuckled, which he quickly tried to cover with a sneeze. Missus Parsons' mouth went thinner than I thought was possible on a human being. "Indeed?" She glared at Paul, then she turned to me. "Follow me, if you please. Miss Hofferson has been waiting for you."

"M-Miss Hofferson?" I quickly grabbed my bag from my seat and stumbled after her, glancing behind at Paul. He grinned and waved me off. "I mean, I did not think I was going to interview her so soon, well at least not until I've unpacked, toured the place so I know where to pee â€" you know, things I thought you guys did to maintain a faÃ§ade of politeness to guests."

"You are her biographer, and time is of the essence here, Miss Thorston. Did Miss Hofferson not state that in her letter?"

"She- uh, she did," I muttered as I tried to remember the exact contents of her letter, "I think." She did say I must not be lateâ€"

She led me through to the other side of the building, out some gorgeous French doors that opened out to a balcony overlooking a beautiful garden. There was a white latticed gazebo nearby, and in its shadow I saw an old lady reading a book.

My breath caught in anticipation. I allowed Missus Parsons to lead me down the steps, up the path and inside the gazebo, and I realised

with increasing excitement that I was finally about to meet the great Astrid Hofferson in the flesh. She glanced up when she heard us coming, and she put her book down to rearrange the shawls around her shoulders. A walking stick was leaning next to her chair. She looked so frail, so fragile, yet when she flicked her icy blue eyes at me, I saw in them a woman who was far from weak.

"Miss Hofferson," Missus Parsons said when we arrived, "Miss Thorston."

"Good morning," I squeaked, nearly collapsing in the chair opposite her, utterly star struck. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

I mentally kicked myself for apologising for something that was not my fault.

Astrid's lips quirked into a ghost of a smirk. "Good morning. Molly, will you please serve Miss Thorston some tea, and then you may leave us."

Missus Parsons did as she was bid, and as her neat heels clicked away from us, I found myself being silently _evaluated_ by this great woman. She swept her blue eyes over me, and I found myself hoping that she did not find me lacking. I _did_ _remember_ to brush my hair today.

"I, uh, guess I just want to say thank you for inviting me to your home." I stated, trying to dissipate the slight awkwardness that settled around us.

"You are welcome," was her reply.

Silence.

"I'm a big fan, by the way." I tried again.

She smiled amusedly. "I am glad."

"And I â€"

"We shall conduct our interviews at sets times every day," she interrupted. "I propose we schedule these in the mornings after breakfast and the evenings in the library after we have dined. I do love the outdoors, so we shall strive to meet here at the gazebo as often as we can during the day. Of course, weather permitting and as long as I am well enough to meet with you."

"Um, sure, why not." I reached for my tea.

"Wonderful," she continued. "We shall also conduct these interviews under certain conditions, and that is: No cheating. And that means: No questions."

I raised my eyebrows. "No questions? What do you mean no questions?"

"It means you are not allowed to ask, because that will be cheating."

"You do realise I'm a biographer, right? I _will_ be asking some

questions in â€œ"

"And I imagine that you had never interviewed any of the people in your studies, seeing as they all died long before you were even born. I, on the other hand, have had many interviews in the past. We shall, therefore, do this under my terms."

I sipped the hot tea to cool my hot tongue, irritated by her rudeness. "Well, if that's the case, before you start your story and thus bind me to your rules I might as well ask you some questions right now." I took a notepad and a pencil from my bag and turned to a fresh page.

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Just a few, you know, questions to ensure that what you will be telling me is the truth." I explained.

Her chest puffed out in indignation. "Miss Thorston, I assure you that everything I will tell you will be nothing but the truth."

"Forgive me, Miss Hofferson. You know that I write the biographies of people who have already died. There's a reason for that, and it's not only because dead people's stories have a beginning, a middle, and a definitive end. I write about dead people because dead people do not lie. They give up their secrets much more easily than living people do. And you have said so yourself that you have cried wolf far too many times before." I looked at her levelly. "I will need more than your assurance. I will need facts."

She grumbled. "And what kind of facts will you be looking for?"

"Names. Let's start with your name." I was thinking if we could start with her name, then we could naturally work down the ladder and list the names of the other people who had played big roles in her life.

But, curiously, she blanched. "My name_?" She faintly asked.

"Sure. Your full name."

She was speechless for a while before her face started to turn red. "Miss Thorston," she huffed. "I am one of the most celebrated authors of this century! Do not waste my time!"

"I know that," I said gently. "But I'd like to start with the basics."

She narrowed her eyes at me sharply before lowering it to look at her tea. I poised my pencil as she took a breath before speaking. I looked up at her when she did not continue, and I was startled by what I saw. She was staring intently at her cup, her mouth poised in the middle of uttering the "A" vowel, but no sound came out.

"You will find that my name isâ€œ|"

She choked. She looked up at me helplessly, and I saw a lost child in those eyes. For a while my reflection swam in those bright blue orbs.

And then she blinked, and the spell was broken. The child was gone to be replaced by her old, steely self.

"You will find in the records, in my birth certificate, even down to the papers that I sign for my solicitors, that my name is still Astrid Hofferson. Surprisingly enough."

I just managed to bite back a retort. Her reaction to my question puzzled me, so for now I decided to keep quiet until I could dig up some more clues.

"What was your tutor's name?"

"Warborough Hall housed two governesses during my lifetime. You will find that their names were Nellie Mayfair and Mary Sawyer."

I noted their names down. "What was your nanny's name?"

"The nanny?" She snorted.

"It is important for my research." I said. I waited for her answer.

"She was known simply as Hettie, and I wish you luck in finding her," she said sardonically.

I wrote her name down all the same, and then let out a breath. My next question was something I had been anticipating to ask ever since I read her letter.

"Miss Hofferson," I looked at her unblinkingly. "Who was the green eyed man in your letter?"

She smiled. "Ah, was that the hook that baited you?" She shifted in her seat. "He was a blacksmith's apprentice, who came to visit Warborough Hall often. He became my best friend, although I was not his."

Heartbreak. And just like that, Miss Hofferson reeled me in deeper to her story. Was it because of the vast differences in their social situations?

"What was his name?" I asked.

Miss Hofferson shrugged. "He was known by all as Hiccup. I knew his father as a great and remarkable man. But Hiccup: we knew him simply as the blacksmith's apprentice. Prone to accidents, but renowned for his brilliance."

It was another potential dead end. Just like Hettie. But I frowned when something nagged at me. Something that did not add up.

She rearranged her shawls. "No more questions," she said briskly. "We will do these interviews my way from this moment on."

"I am your biographer, Miss Hofferson," I repeated. "You know I may need to ask questions."

She sneered at me. "I asked you to be my biographer, and I could just as easily dismiss you if we do not do this my way"

I looked at her levelly. "I was under the impression that I was here upon _your_ request. I could just as easily have ignored your letter."

"And it would not have made a difference if you did. Your kind are a dime a dozen."

I stood up so quickly I spilled my tea on the table. I glared at her down my nose, and she smirked at me from her seat. After a while, I realised that she wasn't worth it, and I told her just as much. I turned and walked away from the gazebo.

"Wait!"

I stomped my way in the grass, making sure I left indents behind me.

"Miss Thorston!"

I ignored her.

"Do you believe in ghosts? My life is one giant, wonderful ghost story!"

I reached the balcony steps. I made sure I left muddy footprints behind me.

"How about a love story?"

My hands reached for the handles in the huge French doors.

"Miss Thorston!"

I opened the doors.

"Do you believe in dragons?"

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

Cliffhangers â€" I has em!

Firstly, I am so sorry for taking a while to upload this. I worked throughout the weekend when I thought I would at least have Sunday off. I hope you enjoyed this chapter though.

Secondly, thank you ever so much to the people who reviewed and added this story to their favourites/follow list. Especially ****LizzyLori****, ****Sweettea8****, and ****Silver Wings.X**** â€" ****you guys rock so much for reviewing! And **Silver Wings.X** thank you so much for your wonderful and very helpful review!**

Thirdly, I think I need a beta. No matter how many times I read the chapters through I always manage to miss something. So if anybody is interested in being my second pair of eyes please PM me :)

****Next chapter****: In which Astrid tells the story of a certain red-haired man and his friend.

3. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 2

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."_

â€" _L.P. Hartley, 1895-1972_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWO:

I paused. _Dragons?_ Honestly! What was wrong with this woman?

I turned to give her my own brand of sarcasm, sure that she was mocking me, but instead I saw her looking at me once again with helpless eyes. She was still in the gazebo, halfway between the table and the footpath, leaning heavily on her ornate cane.

"Miss Thorston, please."

I hesitated.

"Iâ€¦ I need yourâ€¦" She took a deep breath before her pride took over once again. "I need your services, Miss Thorston. Please."

I crossed my arms. "Miss Hofferson. I am not going to help you if you are going to constantly ridicule me."

She regarded me before a smile crept on her lips. "I knew I was right in choosing you." She muttered. "Very well, I will try to keep my tongue in check. But you must understand that my story cannot be told to its full effect if you are going to be asking questions that will ruin the surprises in my narrative."

I regarded her. "Fine." I warily made my way back to her. "I solemnly promise I will not cheat and ask questions unless under special circumstances."

"Such as?"

"Clarification."

She narrowed her blue eyes. "Fine."

I grinned at her. Despite being a difficult old hag, I could see that Astrid Hofferson was going to be _fun_. I sat back down and apologised for the spilt tea before I asked her a question that had been nagging me.

"Miss Hofferson, why did you choose me if â€" according to you â€" my kind was a dime a dozen?"

She chuckled. "Well, you are the only biographer whose works I actually enjoyed reading."

I beamed at her. Wow! What a compliment!

"Besides, you are a twin, are you not?"

"Erâ€| yes?"

She shrugged. "Those are reasons enough."

I raised an eyebrow, confused. "What?"

"No more questions," she said, raising a hand. "All will be revealed in time."

"But â€"

"Remember our agreement, Miss Thorston."

I shut my mouth. I had already forgotten. Man she was going to be a tough one.

"What do you know of my life?" She asked after a while.

"Not much beyond what is public knowledge. And there is very little out there."

"How about the Hofferson family â€" my family?"

"Not much either."

"And Warborough Hall?"

I shook my head. I knew Warborough Hall did not originally belong to the Hoffersons. It was gifted to them, along with their distinguished title, a long time ago.

She looked at me shrewdly. "My family has always been obsessed about privacy, about not divulging more than what is required. I am the same. Generations have kept their secrets confined within these walls. Having read your biographical work, I am sure you would like to know the secrets these walls have been privy to. If only they could speak, hmm?"

I did not reply.

"Do you believe in the supernatural, Miss Thorston?"

"Not really."

"You will need an open mind to believe my tale."

"Because of the ghosts and the dragons?" I asked wryly, but she returned my gaze levelly.

"The walls of Warborough Hall speak, Miss Thorston, but you need to hear. The ghosts of those who have passed through these lands are still here, but you need to see. The dragons still ride upon the wind, but you need to feel."

"I do not understand."

"I hope, in time, you will. I really do." She gestured to me. "Close

your eyes."

"I'm sorry?"

"Close your eyes, child. Please, will you indulge an old woman?"

I looked at her sceptically before I did as she asked.

"Now listen with your ears, and feel with every pore of your skin."

"Won't I need to _see_ with my eyes?"

"Not right now. The ghosts will come later."

I pursed my lips impatiently. "Well, I hear nothing, and feel nothing."

"Just try to hear and feel. Breathe. Think of nothing and breathe."

I sighed. _Breathe in_.

"Do you hear the murmur of the garden?"

Breathe out.

"Do you hear the walls speaking to each other?"

Breathe in.

"Do you feel the caress of the summer air?"

Breathe out.

"Do you feel that puff of breath on your cheek?"

I felt the soft, pine-scented breeze on my face, and I couldn't help but smile, my eyes still closed.

"There was once a young man, of the Haddock clan, who walked through these gardens one summer, a long, long time ago," said Astrid. "He was a young man who did not believe in whispering walls, or of fleeting ghosts. But what he brought with him were dragons, and they had never left these lands since bringing them here."

"He was not a Hofferson, but he was the son of a great Scottish lord. And a redder hair no other man had ever possessed. That flaming crown blazed like a beacon in the morning dew that laced these gardens that morning when he decided to take a gander through these gardens."

"He was a young man in love with his wife. He often travelled this far south with her and, on this particular occasion, he stopped by to visit his newlywed Hofferson friend in Warborough Hall. They had known each other since they were mere children, and while the young Lord Haddock was brave and believed in fantastical things, his Hofferson friend did not believe in anything he could not easily perceive. Ghosts and dragons included."

"The red-headed man ambled on, getting blissfully lost in the small

maze of geometric topiaries. A shadow passed overhead, and he looked up to see a blue shadow disappear behind the dawn-hued clouds. He smiled. The dragons, it seemed, were awake.

"On the other side of the maze was a small lake, and he noticed a certain, young, blond-haired gentleman pondering at the edge of the water. He approached him.

"_Good morning!_ He said cheerily. The young Hofferson turned to him and smiled.

"_What brings you to the gardens this early in the morning?_ Asked the gentleman.

"_The dragons,_ replied the Scot, and the gentleman laughed.

"_Dragons again? You are a strange, strange man_.

"_You know, you will never see them unless you believe_.

"_Still trying to make me believe your foolish tales, I see. _He laughed good-naturedly. _I have always taken your dragons as metaphors for somethingâ€¦ or somethingâ€¦|_

"_Not metaphors_, the Scot tossed his red hair from his eyes. _Just wait until your children fill these halls, my friend, and then you will start seeing dragons too._

"_Not if you're a Hofferson_.

"The red-headed man grinned down at him, and the young Hofferson suddenly laughed as he clapped the Scot in the back. _Speaking of children, I must congratulate you and your beautiful wife once again! I am sure the child she bears will be just as strong and every bit the nuisance you ever were._

"The red-headed man guffawed. _No doubt!_

"_And bring your child to Warborough Hall as often as you can. I am sure my many, many future children will appreciate a playmate to annoy._

"_Aye, that's a promise._

"_And who knows, if you have a son, and I a daughter, perhaps they could even marry each other!_

"_Aye, you better get busy with your wife then!_

"The blond gentleman blushed, and the Scotsman laughed even louder. _So you _have _been busy!_

"_Must you be soâ€¦ vulgar?_

"He chuckled. _Ah, well! _His gaze started to follow something behind the young gentleman before his eyes flicked skywards. His blond-haired friend followed suit, squinting his eyes at the sky. He saw only clouds.

"_More dragons? _He asked drily.

"The Scotsman rumbled a reply. _Come on_, he said, heading back to the manor. _Our wives are breakfasting, and mine is waiting for me to join her most impatiently._

"The young gentleman shook his head as he followed. _I will never understand how you know these things._

"The Scotsman shrugged. _I hope, in time, you will_, he said. _All you need to do is believe_."

Astrid Hofferson stopped speaking, and the silence that followed slowly woke me from the half-dream that she had woven around me. I slowly surfaced from her world as _this _world softly took over my senses once again, and felt not the the caress of summer air, but the crispness of autumn upon my face. I blinked my eyes open and looked at Miss Hofferson. She was smiling kindly at me.

She rang a bell. "We will meet after supper tonight in the library to begin our story. My housekeeper, Missus Parsons, will fetch you when I am ready."

It was clearly a dismissal. I dumped my notebook and pencil in my bag and stood up. Her housekeeper arrived, and I offered her an easy smile. She gave me a tight lipped one in return.

"Follow me."

She led me through the foyer, up the stairs, past the library, around corridorsâ€¦ it was like being led through a maze.

"I think I'll need to buy a red string. You know, to find my way back to daylight."

"You'll get used to it."

"Not if I get eaten by a minotaur first."

"Who's the minotaur here?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

She turned to look at me, measuring me with her eyes. "You probably won't need a red string to find your way out. From what I've heard, you can probably just punch your way out of here."

I barked out a delighted laugh, and then I stopped.

"Wait, heard from whom?"

* * *

><p>I decided to wander around Warborough Hall to get to know my employer better. I wanted to know what she liked doing in her spare time. Besides, I could not know anything further about her life until she told me more, and I could do no further research due to the remoteness of her residence. The village was a good hour's walk away, she had absolutely no Internet connection, and just as I suspected, my mobile phone had no signal.<p>

I first went to the stables and checked out her beautiful horses, deciding then and there that I was going to ask Miss Hofferson permission to ride one in the future. I found a small, locked brick structure which, according to Paul the gardener and my one time chauffeur, used to be a smithy, but was now used as a storehouse. I wandered around the topiary, relieving Miss Hofferson's story, tracing the Scotsman's footsteps, before arriving at the small lake. I gazed at the ducks preening themselves in the water.

A shadow fell over me, and I looked up.

I saw only clouds.

I went back inside and walked around the first floor. I was so delighted to find a grand old music room, complete with an old grand piano. Walls in the corridors were decorated with paintings, while one short, wide corridor was filled with portraits of the past lords and ladies of the house.

I was just about to look at a portrait of a lady in blue when I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Thinking it was the housekeeper or one of the servants, I turned my head to greet whoever it was, but found the room empty.

A little spooked, I turned slowly, eventually facing the window, and just as I was about to return my attention to the portrait, I caught a glimpse of a fluttering white dress reflected on the window. I swivelled around.

"Hello?" I called, but there was no answer. I looked back at the window. Could I have mistaken the flutter of curtains to the movement of a white-clad individual? I had heard no footsteps, after all.

I slowly did a 360 degree turn of the hall once again, hoping to replay the incident, but no luck.

The ghosts will come later, Miss Hofferson had said.

Very much spooked, I left the gallery corridor, feeling the dozens of painted eyes following my every move. My feet inevitably led me to the library. The room was in no way small, but it was oddly shaped. It had five-sides, with four walls stacked with books and huge windows running along the fifth side, its curtains thrown wide open to let as much of the sunshine in as possible. The books were arranged neatly on the walls, a couple of ladders leaning against the shelves. Plush couches and a low table were set up in the middle next to the fireplace.

I walked towards the windows and saw that the wide windowsill was padded for seating. Small cushions and books were littered here and there.

It was obvious that great care was taken to set this room up. It was also obvious that Miss Hofferson spent a great deal of her time here. And it was obvious that this was her favourite room in the entire house.

I walked to one of the walls and saw that a great part of it was filled with every book she had published, with different editions,

some in languages I did not understand. I glanced at a few titles and recognised them all. _The Handsome Missus Brown. The Boy in the Wallpaper. Antoine. _She was a master of her art, writing about anything and everything, her works spanning different genres and touching different generations.

I selected a bright red hardcover without any writing on its spine and immediately recognised what it was upon seeing the title at the front. It was one of my favourites by her: a comedy. I took it down and carried it with me, reading it as I walked, getting lost in the story, completely forgetting about the incident in the portrait hall.

I did not realise that I had already made my way back to my room without the housekeeper's help until I absentmindedly opened the door. I shut it behind me with my butt just as I finished reading the first chapter. I plopped down on the bed and flicked eagerly to chapter two, getting lost once again in the story of a nun who, after a brief run-in with the law, ended up in a dusty, middle-American town eternally painted in hues of orange twilight and deep midnight skiesâ€¦

After a few hours, the words and the characters all started to jumble together. My eyes started to get heavy, and seconds later I nodded off.

Her novel, _Theatre for Devils_, thudded to the floor.

* * *

><p>It turned out that it was a great idea for Missus Parsons to "fetch" me that evening. I woke up with a start when her knock came. I squeezed my eyes shut and growled, a migraine pounding in my head. Why did I have to take a nap? I grumbled inwardly.

I turned my head and found a tray of food sitting on top of my writing desk. I guess Miss Parsons already came in with my supper while I was sleeping, the pervert.

The knock came again, and her voice drifted through the thick door.

"I'm coming," I called. I rubbed my eyes and stood up. I shoved a few spoons of the cold soup in my mouth before grabbing my notebook and pencils. I swallowed a tablet for my migraine before opening the door, giving the housekeeper a bleary-eyed greeting.

She led me back to the library and left me there. The fire was already lit, a pot of tea and a plate of sugared fruit ready at the table. Miss Hofferson had not yet arrived, so I sank down in one of the couches and yawned widely and loudly.

"Cover your mouth, I can smell your breath from here."

Startled, I stood up and turned towards the door where a pair of blue eyes met mine. She stiffly walked towards me, Missus Parsons closing the door behind her.

"Sit down." She commanded when she was settled in her armchair. "Pour the tea."

I grumbled at her rudeness, but did as she asked.

"And what happened to you?" She ran an appraising eye over me. "You look like death just warmed up â€"

"Miss Hofferson."

"â€" you also look like you have dried drool on your chin â€"

"Miss Hofferson!"

"â€" and your hair is a mess! Have you been rolling around the fields with the horses, child?"

"Miss Hofferson, remember our agreement!"

She huffed, but at least that shut her up. She delicately sipped her tea as we slipped into an awkward silence.

"How are you this evening?" I ventured.

"In pain."

She clearly was not in the mood for small talk tonight, and so I sat quietly and waited for her to begin. After a while, she took a deep breath and stared at the fire.

"What does it feel like, to have a brother all of your life?" She asked.

It was an odd question, but perhaps it was not so odd. Astrid Hofferson was an only child.

"It can be fun. But having a sibling can also be very annoying. I sometimes feel like having a brother is a curse. I just want to punch his face in most of the time. It's a good thing I don't see him often, he's in the Navy you know."

She chuckled before turning to me. "Still, it must be a delight to have a brother."

I made a movement that was a cross between a nod and a shake.

She hummed. "Did you know that there is a curse upon the great Hofferson family?"

I leaned forward, intrigued.

"There was a curse placed upon the family a long, long time ago, when greedy old grandfather of the nth degree refused to hand out food during the great famine. The story goes that the family will never know the happiness of hearing the pitter-patter and chitter-chatter of many sons and daughters in its halls for as long as the family exists.

"For generations the curse rang true and strong. A sibling will be cruelly snatched away by illness, or die at the womb. One was even kidnapped, never to be heard from again. For generations this morbid curse hung over my family's head like an executioner's axe. But I

suppose this curse shall end with me: I never had a child. And so the Hofferson line shall, perhaps, also die with me.

"But our line was never meant to have ended this way. It was not what my father intended, nor mine. Many a young man had offered their love to me, after all. But a series of events took place which set the final stage even before I was born, and I did not find out about what the mischievous gods had in store until, unsurprisingly, it was already too late."

Miss Hofferson leaned back into her chair. It took her a while to begin again, leaving me hanging on to her next words.

"Our story begins in the middle of a storm," she began slowly, "and Astrid Hofferson's mother gave birth with great difficulty." She stopped, as if unsure of how to continue. Her use of third person baffled me. But before I could ask, she picked up where she left off, hooking me once again to her tale like the good storyteller that she was.

And before I knew it, I was once again drowning in her story.

"Our story begins," she started, "In the middle of an autumn storm, and Astrid Hofferson's mother gave birth with great difficulty. She started going into labour at midnight, and her screams were lost to the winds that howled through the trees and the thunder that rattled the windows. It was a good thing Lord Hofferson made sure that a midwife stayed in the house at all times during the last few weeks of her pregnancy. He did not believe in the curse, but he wanted to make sure that it did not claim his firstborn just in case it _was _true.

"And so the midwife was there with Astrid's mother from the darkest hours of the night until midday of the following day, by which time the fiery storm had turned into wintry sleet.

"Outside the room, Astrid's father paced restlessly. He had sent a servant to call for the doctor hours ago. Why have they not yet arrived?

"At one o'clock in the afternoon, Lady Hofferson finally let out a pained cry before she fainted in her pillow, and the midwife cried out and held a small baby girl in her arms. She gave the child to her assistant to clean up and immediately went to Astrid's mother to administer her remedies. When she moaned back into consciousness, the midwife began to bind her to stop the bleeding before covering her with a warm blanket. She barked at her assistant to stop dallying and show the child to the father.

"When Astrid's mother finally came to, she immediately demanded to see her baby. Lord Hofferson was ushered in, cradling his newborn gently in his arms, and his wife began to cry with joy. The midwife and assistant started to clean up quickly and quietly, feeling like they were intruding on something deeply personal.

"But then, Lady Hofferson suddenly cried out in pain.

"_Midwife!_" Lord Hofferson called to her in panic.

"The midwife stopped and turned to see her mistress bent double on

her side, gasping out pained breaths. She rushed back to the bed and checked under the sheets. When she saw that the linen was stained with fresh blood, she ushered the young father back outside and shut the door. She knew what was happening, and this was something no husband should see.

"An hour later, the doctor finally arrived on his ambling horse to find Lord Hofferson still sitting outside the room. Servants milled about him quietly, trying to look like they were busy but were loitering around longer than was necessary. He had already given his child to the nursemaid (after much coaxing), but he would not be persuaded to leave his station by his wife's door.

"The doctor put a reassuring hand upon his shoulder before going inside. He closed the door behind him. It was not until an hour later when the anxious new father realised that it was quiet inside. He stood up and waited impatiently for the news.

"The doctor came back out with an ashen face, and the great lord instantly knew what he was going to say. He placed a shaking hand upon his eyes and let out a deep and anguished wail.

"The doctor was speaking, but Lord Hofferson could not understand what he was saying. He caught snippets of it: *Complications* the birth took too long she lost too much blood but none were registering in his brain.

"*I need to see my wife*, he interrupted gruffly, his eyes swimming with tears. *Please*.

"The doctor looked at him sympathetically and bowed his head, stepping aside, before following him to the room.

"The midwife and her apprentice quickly packed up and closed the door behind them.

"The servants outside gossiped in hushed whispers. Nobody knew what was happening inside.

"Much later, Lord Hofferson entered the nursery and walked to where his sleeping daughter lay, lifting her from her cot. The nursemaid keeping watch stood up and melted into the shadows. The Lord looked in wonderment at his child's wisps of blond hair. She squirmed in her sleep.

"*My precious jewel*, he whispered before kissing her forehead. His beard tickled the baby awake. She opened her eyes and Lord Hofferson found that his breath had caught at the sight of those brilliant, blue orbs. Her mother's eyes. He embraced her tightly.

"It was a cruel thing that the Fates played that day. But, as was usually the case, they demanded death in return for life.

"Astrid's mother had died. Astrid had lived. There were no other children of the Hofferson line that slept in Warborough Hall that night, nor has there been one born ever since.

"The curse, it appeared, was as strong as ever."

Miss Hofferson's voice stopped abruptly. She was staring at the fire,

deep in thought. I let out a breath that I didn't realise I was holding. Not much was known about the great author's life, but it was common knowledge that her mother had died giving birth to her. I knew what was going to happen, but the tragic turn of events that came so early in her life still shocked me somehow. It was one thing to read the facts. It was another thing for someone to breathe life to it. She added characters to her story that would hardly have been mentioned if I had done my research after she died. She had painted the scenes with the brilliant shades of life. The helpless anxiety of her father. The endearing scene at the nursery. The death of her mother.

Her mother.

"What was her name?" I asked.

She sighed. "Whose name?"

"Your mother. For clarification," I added when her mouth formed a straight line.

"You will find Lady Hofferson's name printed underneath the portrait of a woman in blue, hanging right next to her husband Lord George Hofferson's portrait."

I suddenly remembered the incident that morning. I shivered. The sly old minx wanted me to work for the answers. I decided that this woman liked being difficult for fun.

"I was in the portrait corridor this morning," I said conversationally, noting down her father's name in my notebook. "Did you have any other visitors this morning in the estate other than me?"

"No. And the house is not open to the public while I am in residence. Why do you ask?"

"No reason in particular."

She looked at me, and a smile crept to her lips. "Ah! You have seen a ghost!"

"What? No!"

"Well then, what did you see?"

"A corridor with paintings on one side, and curtains fluttering on the other."

She shrugged. "Perhaps what you saw was a mere shadow in the portrait, or perhaps it was simply the curtains fluttering in the wind. A trick of the eye. But at the time, you believed you saw a ghost, did you not?" She leaned forward. "You know, Lord Hofferson did not believe in ghosts, even though they were everywhere. And so the great lord did not believe the young Astrid when she burst into the drawing room where he sat smoking, crying that she had seen a ghost." Her eyes glittered in the firelight. "She was nearly sobbing in fright. What about you? Were you frightened?"

I snorted. "No."

"You lie!"

"No! I swear I wasn't frightened. But I wasâ€|" I looked for a less humiliating word. "Startled."

And she still laughed at me.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

I decided to combine Chapters Two and Three together since I was finding it really hard to make a clean break between the two. Ah well, hope you liked this longer chapter!

From here on I will no longer have pre-written chapters up my sleeve (I have a couple with a paragraph or two written to help me flesh out the plot a little more). So even though I know where to go in the middle and the end, I don't know how this story will take me there. Exciting stuff!

Special mention to ****LizzyLori ****for the wonderful review! :)

* * *

><p>Next chapter: In which Astrid talks about her mother.

4. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 3

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_Childhood is not only the childhood we really had but also the impressions we formed of it in our adolescence and maturity."_

â€" _Cesare Pavese, 1908-1950_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER THREE:

"Well," Astrid said in between her laughter, "I say being startled is the same as being frightened."

I mumbled something unintelligible, even to me.

"My dear, there is nothing wrong with admitting to being frightened by something you cannot explain."

I pursed my lips. "The thing is, Miss Hofferson, when someone frightens me, I usually just kick them in the gut, and then I feel better as they writhe in pain. I can't really do that to ghosts, can I?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But what if the ghost suddenly turned into someone you knew. What if the ghost turned into someone you knew could not have existed beyond what is reflected in the mirror? Will you kick the ghost of you?"

I blinked. "Um, Iâ€| actually don't know how to answer that."

"I ask this strange question because, you seeâ€| Astrid had always liked wandering around, much to her nursemaid and governesses' frustration. She was known by all as the little nomad, and in one of her early morning wanderings, she saw a ghost. A ghost! In the gardens! Or perhaps it was a faery child. Whatever it was, the spectre frightened the young girl so much that she came back to the house as fast as her short legs could carry her.

"She burst into the drawing room where her father was smoking as he read the morning paper. She clambered upon her papa's knees and clutched at his shirt as she sobbed in fright.

"Lord Hofferson tried to soothe her, and after a few hiccups she finally managed to utter one word.

"_Ghost!_"

"_Ghost? _Her father asked, ever the sceptic. _My little nomad, there is no such thing as a ghost._"

"_But papa, I really saw her! I was walking, and walking, and then I heard someone mimicking my steps. And I turned around, and there she was!_"

"_Who did you see?_"

"Astrid squirmed in his embrace. _I sawâ€| me._"

"Lord Hofferson laughed, almost with relief. _My dear, you saw only your own reflection._"

"Now Astrid did not like being laughed at, especially when she knew she was in the right. And so she pouted, her face going red with pent up anger. _I know what I saw, _she insisted._ And I saw another me!_"

"_Of course you did, _Mr Hofferson chuckled as he kissed her round face before setting her down. _Now run along and find me another adventure!_"

"And so it was that Astrid decided to never be afraid of anything that she could not explain. In fact, she swore that the next time she saw this child ghost, she was going to walk right up to her and tell her off for scaring her._."_"

Miss Hofferson grinned at me proudly.

"So did you really see a ghost?" I asked.

"Ah," she replied ambiguously.

"'Cause I'm with your papa here. I bet you just saw your own reflection in the window."

"Perhaps."

I puffed out my cheeks in frustration.

"You will get your answers later, child. I promise I will leave no mystery unsolved."

"And I suppose your father didn't look into this incident further."

"Well, it gave him reason to write to his red-headed friend. Astrid was, after all, at an age when exposure to other children would greatly benefit her. Perhaps that was why she conjured up an imaginary ghost. Or it could very well have been another child from the village come wandering the grounds in the morning, and this my father did not like at all. Or worse, it could have beenâ€¦ well, something else entirely!

"He immediately wrote to his Scottish friend, and invited him to Warborough Hall next time he was in the area, for the Haddocks were great travellers and loved nothing more than questing everywhere. Can you guess why my father wrote to the Scotsman?"

I grinned. "His son, a playmate for you to annoy, as promised."

"His son, a year older than Astrid, but a toothpick of a boy to Astrid's childish chubbiness. They had never met before, as both children had been too young to travel when either parent was visiting the other. But now that the chance presented itself, Lord Haddock grabbed the opportunity and, sooner than even my father had anticipated, the Lord and Lady Haddock had arrived with their son in tow.

"Astrid tried to like the boy. She really did. But she did not understand him, and he did not understand her. She liked following the rules of the games that they played, whereas he tended to overcomplicate things. He had a wild imagination, whereas Astrid inherited her father's hard-headedness. Astrid spoke her mind, yes, but this boy! Lord help us, even at that young age, that boy had a mouth as quick as a whip and as sharp as a tack.

"Finally, after what felt like an eternity for Astrid, the time came for the Haddocks to be on their way. But where were the children? The nursemaids and Nellie, Astrid's governess at the time, asked around, and before long word got out that the children were nowhere to be found in the house. In increasing panic they searched high and low. They were not hiding in their rooms. They have not climbed down to the cellars. They were not begging for pies in the kitchens. They called for them, enticed them with sweets, promised them with games, and finally threatened them with anger. But the children did not come out.

"Suddenly, two of the gardeners came in, carrying a child each. Both children were mud encrusted from head to toe, their faces smeared and beyond recognition if not for their distinctive eyes. The Lady Haddock took one look at her son and laughed, taking him in her arms from the gardener and not minding the mud at all. The two Lords, however, shook their heads in exasperation. The servants that had helped in the search rolled their eyes in amusement.

"Astrid was grinning proudly. But the young Haddock boy was looking tearfully at his parents.

"_Oh Astrid, _Lord Hofferson knelt to her level after the gardener had lifted her down. _What have you done to the boy this time?_"

"_What? Why me? Ask him!_"

"Lord Haddock glanced at his wife, then at the boy. _Son, what did you do to Astrid?_"

"_I didn't do anything! _He shouted defensively.

"_Liar! _Astrid snarled.

"_Am not!_"

"_Liar!_"

"_Astrid, _Lord Hofferson gave her a look. In fact, it was the very same look he gave her naught but a week before when he caught her trying to climb the library bookshelves without a ladder. She knew that look well. And she knew that when he gave her _that_ look, there was no way of winning.

"And so Astrid sighed in defeat and explained. _We were walking in the gardens. I asked him if he had a parting gift for me. He said he did, but he did not have it yet, but he also did at the same time. Papa, he was being weird again, as usual._"

"_I am not weird! _The boy was nearly crying at the injustice of it all.

"_Are too!_"

"_Astrid, _Lord Hofferson warned her.

"_But_ _I did give her a parting gift! _The boy exclaimed defensively.

"_Yeah, right! _Astrid snorted. _What kind of a parting gift is a kiss?_"

"There was a moment of silence as the adults digested this new information, and then Lady Haddock roared with laughter. _You kissed her?_"

"The boy looked down sheepishly. _Only because you kiss father before he goes on long trips, and he kisses you too whenever you leave._"

"The Haddocks and Lord Hofferson looked at each other. The Scotsman shrugged. _Well, the lad has a point._"

"_And I thought she was pretty, _the boy added, emboldened._ Not anymore though._"

"_Take that back! _Astrid nearly launched herself at him if not for her father's restraining hand.

"_Astrid, apologise. Now._"

"_What am I apologising for?_"

"_Uh, for shoving me in the mud? _The boy piped up.

"_I shoved you in the mud so that you can UN-kiss me!_"

"_Astrid, if you don't apologise to Lord Haddock's son in three secondsâ€¦|_"

"_Alright! Alright! I'm sorry. _

"_For? _Her father prompted.

"Astrid gritted her teeth. _For pushing him in the mud._

"The boy sniffed._ Well, I am not sorry for kissing her._

"Astrid let out a scream as the boy stuck his tongue out from his safe position upon his mother's arms.

"_Well, I think we should get this filthy Romeo cleaned up. _Lord Haddock quickly urged his wife to move before another fight could break out.

"_I agree_, Lady Haddock winked at Astrid. _But before we leave, I would just like to say, on behalf of my son: thank you for giving him his first ever mud bath._

"_Mama! _The boy cried, feeling utterly betrayed.

"_Right, let's get you cleaned up! _She turned on her heels, her son still protesting in her arms.

"Lord Hofferson looked over at the two gardeners who were trying their utmost not to laugh, and mostly failing. He sighed. He decided that the ghost would probably be far more tolerable than another night of squabbling children.

"Needless to say, that was the last time in a very, very long time that the Haddocks brought their son with them to Warborough Hall."

Astrid sat back on her chair.

I sniggered. "Wow."

"Indeed."

"That sounded like something my brother and I used to do."

"I can imagine," Astrid said, smiling. However, she suddenly grimaced with pain.

"Miss Hofferson?"

"I'mâ€¦| I'm quite alright."

"Should I fetch a doctor?"

She waved her hand. "No need. It is my illness, fighting the

medicine. I am fine." She took a shuddering breath, and after a while she leaned back in her chair and smiled faintly. "See? I am fine, or as fine as dying would allow. We shall, however, continue tomorrow at breakfast, if you do not mind."

"Not at all."

She nodded gratefully as she rang a bell. "Good evening, Miss Thorston."

I gathered my things and bade Miss Hofferson good night once Missus Parsons arrived with another lady, who I presumed was Astrid's nurse. I measured her with my eyes as I passed her "could she have been the spectre I had seen earlier today?"

After leaving the library, I gathered enough courage to make a quick midnight detour to the portrait corridor in search of Astrid's mother. There were a few portraits of women in blue, but my eyes were instantly drawn to the portrait I was looking at before. The portrait of the woman with ice-blue eyes, her blond hair tucked in a bonnet, a small smile mischievously gracing her lips as if she had in her possession something that was mine, something that I had not yet realised I had lost.

I shivered.

She looked like a younger, curvier Astrid Hofferson. The portrait was hung next to a bearded man in hunting clothes, dogs sitting attentively and adoringly around their master's feet. Portrait of Lord George Hofferson in Hunting Dress, the silver label under the painting read.

I looked back at Lady Hofferson's portrait and admired her beauty.

Her name was Bertha.

* * *

><p>I barely slept at all that night, but worked long and hard transcribing Miss Hofferson's story. I notated not only her words, but also her movements when she relived her childhood to me. I mimicked her actions as I wrote them: The quirk of her eyebrows, the subtle changes in her voice, the hand movements as she painted a scene in the air.<p>

After hours of transcribing, I stood up and stretched, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension caused by hunching over my desk for too long. I flicked to the back of my notebook and silently read the list of questions that Miss Hofferson was yet to answer. And then an idea struck me.

I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote to my good friend, Fishlegs, to research the Haddock family for me. I knew him from days of old "from high school, actually, and I knew him well for his investigative mind. He already lived and breathed research anyway, doing a doctorate at university and all, so this should be a cinch for him. He was the perfect candidate.

Fishlegs? Oh, well, obviously Fishlegs was not his real name, but it

was a nickname that had stuck with him throughout high school and beyond after a hilarious accident in Year 9 which earned the little geek the respect of the entire school. Besides, he never liked his real name anyway, and so the Fishlegs name stuck. He had always been a very good friend to me - Tuff even went so far as to suggest that the reason why he was so nice was because he fancied me. Ugh, come on! Me and Fish? Pfft yeah, no. Even if he did, that guy can't handle me.

As I wrote the letter, I started to feel a little guilty. I felt like I was going behind Miss Hofferson's back, even though I knew I could trust Fish. I also felt like this story was currently a secret between Astrid and me, for some bizarre reason. But I had to know. And so it was to him, and not my friends at the publishing house, that I sought help in finding more information about regarding the Haddocks from the North. All I could give him were the scant details that Miss Hofferson had told me, but I knew it would be enough.

I tapped my pen upon the paper as I gathered my thoughts. While I felt guilty, I didn't really feel like this was cheating. As promised, this was for clarification. She gave me the names of all involved except for the very person who initiated the muddy kiss: Lord Haddock's son. I found that a little strange, and this strangeness needed to be clarified. I hunched over my desk once again.

"_Find me the Haddocks, Fishlegs. But most importantly: __Find me the son.__"

I chewed the top of my pen. I mean, it's not like I would not be able to find the boy's name easily anyway. The Haddocks were an aristocratic family after all. Their family tree would be so easy to trace Fish would be disappointed I didn't give him something more difficult.

After another moment's thought, I added: "C_an you also find a family connection to dragons - I'm talking family crests, perhaps their residence was named after one, maybe even look for the remains of a real dragon. I don't know, Fish, just look for dragons."_

I shoved the letter in an envelope I found on my writing desk and quickly scribbled his university address at the back. I then slid it in the tray that was still holding my cold soup. I was sure Missus Parsons would find it when she picked the tray up tomorrow. I just hoped she wouldn't read it before she posted itâ€|

Actually, she probably _would_. She read Miss Hofferson's letter to me, after all, otherwise she would not have known that Astrid told me not to be late. And if she knew about the contents of this particular letter, then Astrid would know also, and God only knows what Astrid would have done if she found out. Perhaps she'd dismiss me, which would have been nightmare, because she already had me so completely entangled with her tale that I would have gone nuts if I didn't hear how it ended.

I picked the letter back up from the tray and decided to give it to Paul instead. I was sure I could trust Paul.

I barely noticed that it had started to rain until a sudden shower pattered against my window. With my room facing the topiary, I could

just hear someone's boots squelching in the mud in the gardens. I glanced at my watch. It was already quarter past five, and the dark horizon outside my window was yet to lighten. Even so, the world felt like it was breathing awake once again after its nightly death.

And I felt very much ready for slumber.

So I scrambled into my bed, not even bothering to unbraid my hair, and I instantly fell asleep to the faint tune of someone humming an underwater lullaby. But I had barely slept a wink when I was woken once again by a loud knock at my door. I groggily opened an eye and noted that it was already light outside.

It was still raining.

I shuffled to the door and opened it, glaring at the housekeeper. She raised an eyebrow.

"Miss Hofferson has requested you to join her at breakfast."

"What?" I groaned. "It's too early for breakfast!"

She sniffed. "I would hardly call seven-thirty early."

"It is to me!" I snapped. I knew I was being incredibly immature, and that I had to act like a professional, and meet my employer downstairs, andâ€¦ butâ€¦

I looked back longingly at my warm bed.

"She will wait for you at the drawing room," Missus Parsons said before walking away. I inwardly groaned and shut the door hard behind me.

Will I never get any proper sleep in this house?

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

Do you think that Ruff is cheating by asking Fishlegs to find out more about the Haddock's?

And yay Fishlegs is introduced! It's so not obvious that I ship Rufflegs. I also ship Ruffgur. Yeah, I ship both. No, I don't know which one I ship harder.

Also: Lady Hofferson's name. At the time of writing, Dreamworks hasn't disclosed Astrid's mother's name yet. And since I read somewhere that Astrid was based off Camicazi anyway (it was mentioned by Bonnie Arnold, I think?), I decided to name her mother Bertha too, after Cami's mother :)

As for Lady Hofferson's portrait, please see the updated cover image of this fic to see the real portrait that I based it on. To anyone interested, it is a portrait of a young Amalie of Zweibrücken-Birkenfeld, the first Queen of Saxony._
>

Once again thanks to **LizzyLori **for the incredible support! I am

very glad that you are enjoying the story so far. And **Sweettea8
**for your kind words, and because you liked it so much I shall start
writing longer chapters from now on! :D

**Next Chapter: **In which we learn about what happened to Astrid's
first governess, Nellie Mayfair. The atmosphere gets darker: The next
chapter definitely won't be as cute and cuddly as this one.

**PS: **If you are enjoying the story please leave a review! You have
no idea what your words do to fanfic writers. We squeal and do a
little dance when we get a notification in the mail. We are but
parched, melodramatic beasts, and your reviews are the only things
that would quench our thirst.

5. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 4

THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL

"_Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the
past, the more concrete and plausible it seemsâ€"but as you approach
the present, it inevitably seems incredible."_

â€" _Salman Rushdie, 1947-_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FOUR:

"You should rename this house," I mumbled.

"Oh?" Miss Hofferson replied, amused.

"Yeah. It should be called: Sleepless Hall."

She laughed. "I gather you did not sleep well last night?"

"I hardly slept at all, since your cranky housekeeper woke me up far
too early this morning."

"And here I thought you did not sleep because of the ghosts."

I tried to give her a wry look, but my exhaustion took over my senses
and I found myself trying to stifle a yawn instead. Miss Hofferson
smiled as she delicately drank her breakfast chocolate. "Not a
morning person, I see," she murmured.

"I was never a morning person to begin with."

My stomach decided to growl then, reminding me that I had not eaten
dinner the previous night. I looked at Miss Hofferson apologetically,
and she gestured for me to eat. She watched on amusedly as I helped
myself to some toast and jam.

"I looked for your mother's portrait last night," I said
unthinkingly, biting my toast.

"Did you?"

I nodded. I quickly wished that I had not mentioned it. I feared that

she was going to tease me about it once more. "She's very beautiful," I quickly said instead.

Miss Hofferson laughed. "Lady Hofferson was the most beautiful woman in her youth. She was also celebrated for her quick wit, her grace, and for her blessed figure. Every man wanted to be her husband, and every woman kept away for fear of being outshone. But all these people only saw her as the lady her family polished her to be. Scratch the painted surface and you would have found a very different Bertha underneath."

I grinned in anticipation.

"She," Miss Hofferson said with a twinkle to her blue eyes, "was many things. But, most importantly, she was a great thief. If you asked anyone who had witnessed her growing up, she would have been described as competitive, a great pest, and a thorn to her governesses' backsides. And so it should come as no surprise that I, her daughter, inherited all of those qualities too. You know, I was a pretty good burglar, when I was younger."

I sniggered. I remembered the fun my brother and I used to have as thieving little monkeys.

"So what did you steal?"

She shrugged. "A great many things. I could steal a visiting lady's jewellery without her realising it. I always gave them back though. I had no use for them. I was also very good at blending in the shadows and being invisible. You see, people begin to be unguarded when they think that shadows cannot hear. That was how I managed to know so much about my family's secrets."

"I wish my brother and I had thought about spying when we were younger," I said. "All we ever did was wrestle and wreck things, and try to think up ways to make everything faster and louder."

Astrid Hofferson laughed. "As a biographer whose main goal is to look over other people's shoulders and spy on their lives, I am sure you are making up for lost time. Women are the best creatures to spy on, don't you think? Try it on your mother while she is gossiping with her friends, and you will see what I mean."

My mouth suddenly went dry. I put my toast down. "My mother isâ€¦ she is no longer here."

Miss Hofferson's smile disappeared. "Oh! Iâ€¦ do beg your pardon."

I shrugged and offered her a small smile. "That's okay. I'll try spying on my brother next time he's in town." I winked at her.

She gathered her shawls about her and smiled. "Just remember to keep your ears open. Not everything we hear is uttered with words, for even shadows have stories to tell."

"Whoah. How do you know these things?"

She shrugged. "I have had a lot of practice. I had no choice. Besides, I would not have been the author you see before you now if I had not heard, and sometimes even witnessed the lives and hardships

of so many people. That was how I managed to know every delicious detail of my mother's life, even though I never actually knew her. There was one particular interest of hers that I found to be completely fascinating, and while this interest was a little common amongst ladies of leisure in my mother's time, I believe it is deemed rather scary and unusual for ladies of your generation." She inclined her head in my direction.

"It takes a lot to scare me, Miss Hofferson."

"Good. Perhaps I shall show you once we are finished with breakfast. You might even like to investigate it."

My drowsiness immediately dissipated. "I've finished, I've finished!" I exclaimed excitedly as I jumped up from my seat with renewed energy.

"Settle down, child. I said you may investigate after we have finished eating. I am still enjoying my chocolate, and I would prefer not to be rushed."

I sat back down with a huff, cheeks hot with embarrassment. I looked at her to make a trivial comment, but I found her suddenly sitting alertly, silently - as if she was listening intently to a call in her inner ear. I remembered what she said, about the walls of this manor house speaking to each other if you listened closely enough, and so I mimicked her and tried my hardest to listen.

I closed my eyes.

A shower of rain was suddenly tossed by the wind against the windows. The clattering sound was calming. I found myself breathing evenly, but I really was never any good at conjuring images and sounds in my head without the aid of another's voice. And so all I heard was the rain. I could not hear the walls speaking.

All I could hear was the rain.

"What do you hear, Miss Thorston?" She asked curiously.

I sighed and opened my eyes. "Nothing."

"But you were listening to something."

"I was listening to the rain."

"And what did the rain tell you?"

I blinked. "Pardon?"

"What did the rain tell you?"

"Umâ€¦ I did not realise that the rain was, er, speaking to meâ€¦?" The statement sounded like a question even to my ears.

She shifted in her seat, and it was then that I realised that she was sitting on a wheelchair. "I, too, was listening to the rain. For the rain carried a voice within it, clutched between the hands of mist and water thatâ€¦" she trailed off, as if she was hearing something once again.

"What is the rain telling you now, Miss Hofferson?"

She chortled. "No, the rain did not tell me anything. It was simply carrying the echoes of a cry. It sounded like a cry for attention, actually..."

"From who?"

"The dragons. More specifically, mine," she said without batting an eyelid, as if this was the most natural response to my question. I tried to look for sarcasm in between her words, but I found none. I wondered if she was as mad as some of the biographers made her out to be.

"You do not believe me, do you?" She asked sadly.

"Iâ€¦| confess I do not know what to believe, Miss Hofferson."

She hummed. "Uncertainty is more than what I could have asked for from you. I am just glad that you are _at least_ trying to believe. I am glad you have not outright doubted my sanity, though I am sure it has crossed your mind more than once. Perhaps it is crossing your mind right now."

My cheeks were burning once again at the truth of her words. I turned back to my toast and bit a mouthful so that I did not have to respond.

"No matter," she chuckled, "we shall continue with our story, so that you may go on your merry way to investigate my mother's collections." She settled more comfortably in her seat before she once again picked up the threads from where we left off last night. I brushed the crumbs from my hands and opened my notebook, my pen at the ready.

"Lord Hofferson decided that the ghost was more tolerable than another night of squabbling children," she began. "Well, at least the ghost did not vex Astrid so much. At least the ghost did not cause too much trouble and, for the most part, at least the ghost brought relative peace in the household compared to Lord Haddock's son.

"Astrid's governess, however, did not like it that her employer was indulging the idea of Astrid having a ghost friend. Nellie Mayfair, Astrid's first governess, was level-headed and was definitely not given to fanciful imaginings. She had, after all, read Henry James' popular novella with derision, and had tossed _The Turn of the Screw_ aside with a snort. She thought the governess in that tale an utter ignoramus for coddling the idea of the supernatural without first looking at the events - and at the 'ghosts' - through an objective lens. Nellie believed that the fictional governess thus infected the minds of her charges with visions of ghosts rather than protected them from these villains, as was supposed to have been her duty.

"No, Nellie was determined not to do the same mistake with _her_ _own_ charge. And so whenever Astrid made mention of her ghost friend, Nellie would quickly correct her. If Astrid said: _We saw a bird take flight_, Nellie would correct her with: _I__ saw a bird take flight_.

When Astrid said: _We were hiding behind the curtains_, Nellie would say: _I_ was hiding behind the curtains, not we, for you were hiding there alone. _

"At first Astrid repeated what she said, word for word, like a parrot. Nellie was, after all, her educator and was thus the point of authority on all things grammatical. But Astrid was not a stupid child of seven, and she very soon caught on to what Nellie was trying to do. Astrid did not like it one bit, for the ghost was as real as real could be. Why was the governess trying to stamp out her existence?

"And so, to spite Nellie, whenever Astrid said things such as: _We stole some bread from the kitchens_, _and when Nellie corrected her with: _I_, not _we_, stole some bread, _Astrid would respond with: _Well that's not very nice of you to steal bread! _The governess would growl in frustration, and then explain the difference between 'I' and 'we', with Astrid feigning idiocy, humouring her for a little while. But when she finally tired of the game, she would simply revert back to saying 'we', and watched on with glee as her governess' face contorted with annoyance.

"One beautiful sunny day, on one of those rare occasions when Astrid was free from the schoolroom and was wandering the grounds as she pleased, Nellie decided to take a refreshing walk to the village. Her employer was not in residence: He had left a few days prior to visit a neighbouring estate, and so the atmosphere in Warborough Hall was a little more relaxed. She told the housekeeper as she donned her hat where she was going, and to not expect her back until sundown.

"She stepped outside in the sunshine, her boot crunching in the gravel as she made her way to the gates. She saw Astrid in the distance to her left. She had already climbed a very high tree, and her nursemaid was crossly yelling for her to get down _this very instant_! The governess rubbed her temple at this scene, but a smile crossed her lips. Astrid may be the most difficult, unladylike little girl she had ever come across, but she still endeared herself to Nellie's heart.

"She decided to leave Astrid to her fun for now. Astrid was not her charge for today " at least, not until she was back from the village to resume her duties. For now, Astrid, with her torn dress and dirty face and skinned knees, was her nursemaid's problem.

"Nellie hummed a tune as she walked. It was such a beautiful, clear, miracle of a day. There was a spring to her step and a curl to her hair. She felt that nothing could possibly go wrong on a God-blessed day such as that day.

"She walked out of a grassy path, onto a sheep-laden meadow, with the edge of the woods to her right. The hill that overlooked the village was just ahead of her, but just as she crested the top, she felt a pair of eyes on the back of her neck. She paused.

"She saw a flash of movement in the shadows of the green woods to her right. She whipped her head around to catch who it was that was haunting her footsteps. She squinted through the trees, trying to make sense of what she thought she had seen.

"Finding nothing, Nellie shrugged and continued on. But just as she started walking once more, she saw a child in a blue dress dart across the meadow, wild curls flying as she ran towards Warborough Hall. The child turned to glance at her, and the sight nearly made the governess stumble. Those eyes, those ears, that round face â€" Nellie would recognise those features _anywhere_.

"_Astrid! _Nellie bellowed furiously. How did that child get ahead of her so quickly? And so far away from the house too â€" and where was Hettie her nursemaid? Nellie shouted for her to stop, but the child kept running, and soon disappeared amidst the tall grass in the meadow.

"Sighing that she would not be able to go to the village after all, Nellie stayed a few minutes longer in the fields. Astrid did not appear again. In fact, it seemed like she had disappeared into thin air. _Preposterous! _Nellie thought. _The little nuisance had simply sneaked back to the house from under your nose_! And so she rushed her way back to the Hall, a furious reprimand to Hettie already forming in her mind. She ran through the gates, barely acknowledging the groundskeeper's surprise at finding her back so soon. She entered the house breathlessly and called for the nursemaid. She walked to the other side of the house, out the balcony, down the steps, andâ€" stopped dead in her tracks.

"_Impossible! _She hissed. For there, at the gazebo, sat Hettie and Astrid. One of the gardener's boys was raking the leaves not far away.

"She slowly made her way to them, trying to make sense of what she had just seen in the meadows.

"At the gazebo, Astrid was sitting upon Hettie's lap as her nursemaid wiped her dirty face with a washcloth. But it was not this that shocked Nellie into silence. She reached out a hand to steady herself, leaning against the gazebo entrance to keep her from falling.

"Astrid and Hettie both looked at her with interest as she looked back at them in shock. Her mouth was agape, trying unsuccessfully to form wordsâ€" Any words! Any at allâ€" but she could find none. For Astrid's hair was in a braid, not in a mess of tangled curls that she very clearly saw in the sunshine.

"In addition to this, Astrid was also not wearing a blue dress. Rather, she was wearing a _red_ dress â€" the same dress that Nellie herself picked out for her that morning.

"_Astrâ€" Astrid? _She finally managed to choke out.

"Hettie and Astrid looked at each other, then back at her. _Are you alright, Miss? _Hettie ventured.

"_I'mâ€" _sheâ€" she has not left your side all this time?_

"_No Miss, this pesky nomad did not want to get down from her tree until I pointed out a beehive above her. _Hettie tickled Astrid's cheeks and the child wrinkled her nose. But when Nellie did not reply, Hettie looked back at the governess with increasing concern. _Are you sure you're alright, Miss?_

"Iâ€¦ I am not sure. _Nellie tried to turn the facts over her head. Astrid had been with Hettie all this time. Unless the nursemaid was lying? No, Hettie would not have looked so confused if she had been lying. And why would Hettie allow Astrid to chase after Nellie in the first place? Besides, Astrid would have needed to have jumped off the tree and swooped through the woods in order for her to arrive at the meadows before the governess. Andâ€¦ and Astrid could not have changed out of her dress, unbraided her hair, run past Nellie, changed back to her red dress, and re-braided her hair in the very short time that had passed!

"_Could she?_"

"No! It was absolutely impossible!

"Nellie felt very faint indeed.

"_Miss, you are very pale, I think you need to sit down, _Hettie said as she stood, placing Astrid on the chair that she had just vacated._ I will call for water._ _You look like you have seen a ghost!_"

"Astrid gasped. _You have seen the ghost? Where is she now?_"

"A rebuke was ready at Nellie's tongue, but she stopped. How could she rebuke the child when she could not even rebuke herself?

"There was no two ways around it. She _had_ seen a ghost.

"_I have gone mad, _she whispered, her eyes clouding with tears. She felt her knees give way underneath her as Hettie cried to the boy raking nearby for help.

"Everybody knows that all great houses have ghosts. Warborough Hall is no different. The spirit that manifested itself that sunny day chilled Nellie to her very bones, for she could make neither head nor tail of it. She could not rationalise what she saw. The ghost had shattered her entire conviction with just that single backward glance.

"When Lord Hofferson returned a few nights later, Nellie Mayfair's bags were already packed. She handed a letter to her employer, explaining why she could not work at the house any longer. It explained everything that had happened, and described everything she saw in detail.

"It was a swift but painful goodbye. Astrid _did_ like Nellie, even though she did not like the fact that Nellie tried to force Astrid to not believe in the existence of the ghost. And now that she had finally seen for herself that the ghost was real, Astrid was saddened that her new ally would not stay. Truth be told, she felt a little betrayed.

"Nellie, meanwhile, was crying in the coach as it lurched away from Warborough Hall. She had just realised that she had very nearly become the physical representation of Henry James' silly, fictional governess â€" the very person she had sworn she would never become.

"Nellie left Warborough Hall that night without a backward glance.

"The ghost of Warborough Hall had claimed her first victim."

A sudden wind rattled the windows in the drawing room. Miss Hofferson and I turned in the direction of the noise at the same time. An icy chill settled at the back of my neck.

"How are you feeling, Miss Thorston?"

"A little spooked, I must say," I replied. It wasn't the ghost that spooked me so much. It was the fact that Nellie, the rational governess, saw the ghost for herself. It spooked me because she was the rational voice that should have debunked the ghost myth forever, yet she ended up confirming its existence in the end.

Miss Hofferson was holding out an envelope to me, and for a second I was afraid that it was my letter to Fishlegs. And then I remembered that my letter was still in my pocket. With a quiet sigh of relief, I took the envelope from her and read the script at the back.

"Nellie's resignation letter," she looked at me shrewdly. "Your proof that the tale I have told you was true."

I smiled at her gratefully and slipped it in my notebook. "Thank you," I murmured. As she quietly finished her chocolate, I suddenly remembered my list of questions. "Miss Hofferson, may I ask you something?"

She immediately stiffened.

"I mean, it's probably not important, but I just wanted to ask you why you keep using third person whenever you delve into your story. Why distance yourself from your past self?"

Astrid was silent for a long time. I did not realise it was such a difficult question for her. Or maybe she was judging whether she could cry foul and if she could classify my question as cheating.

"Miss Hofferson?"

"I use third person, Miss Thorston, because I did not use to be Astrid," she finally replied. "Rather, I became Astrid Hofferson" — that is, the Astrid Hofferson you see now, the Astrid Hofferson that wrote those famous novels, and the Astrid Hofferson that the world knows. The Astrid in my story is not me, even though all along I had been her since birth, and she me. Do you understand, Miss Thorston?" She pressed her lips together to stem the torrent of words that further threatened to spill from her mouth.

But I did understand her, and I told her that I understood her completely. I can sort of relate — damn if anyone thought that I was the same Ruffnut as the Ruffnut from before my mother died. I mean, come on. My career choice is proof of that.

She seemed to wither in her chair with relief when she realised that she did not have to explain further. After a moment Missus Parsons

entered and murmured something in her ear. Astrid nodded, and the housekeeper stepped back to wait for her next instruction.

"I am afraid that I cannot show you my mother's collections myself, Miss Thorston," she said. "It seems that my solicitor has arrived a little earlier than we anticipated."

I looked at her, crestfallen.

"Oh, don't look so upset. I shall have Molly bring it up to your room at noon when she brings in your lunch."

And so it was with higher spirits that I took my leave and left the drawing room. I searched for Paul the gardener and found him smoking by the kitchen door with a cup of tea. I gave him my letter to post and urgently swore him to secrecy.

"Not a word," he promised me as he tapped the side of his nose and winked at me as he pocketed the envelope.

"Thanks, I owe you one." I was about to leave when I doubled back to ask him another question. "By the way, is it just the two of you here with Miss Hofferson? I mean, does she have any other servants besides you guys?"

"In terms of permanent servants who reside here?" He asked, "Yes, we are the only ones. There's the gamekeeper too, Sam, but he lives in a cottage with his wife and dogs nearer to the park. Molly here does the cooking and all, and I do the gardening and other general things that need to be done, like drive to the village to fetch important people such as yourself, or post our mail in the village. We also hire cleaners to help out with cleaning and all that, but they don't live here. It's just us. There's only Miss Hofferson to take care of, after all, and she never liked the fuss of having a full house of servants just to serve her. She's obsessed with independence and all that. Oh, I forgot Lisa. She's her nurse, so I guess she also countsâ€¦"

I thanked him before he could utter another word, and as I walked away I turned this information over in my head. Miss Hofferson said that all great houses had ghosts, and that Warborough Hall was no differentâ€¦

So which of Warborough Hall's servants did I see in the portrait hall?

Just like Nellie Mayfair, I did not believe in ghosts. At least, not until I could prove their existence. There had to be a rational explanation to these supernatural events. Perhaps I could interview Missus Parsons, Paul, and Lisa the nurse. Ask them about their experiences in Warborough Hallâ€¦

Suddenly, a light bulb turned on in my head. What a great idea! Actually, I had Miss Hofferson to thank for this one. Because rather than ask them, why don't I just _spy _on them?

Even shadows have stories to tell.

I started to walk aimlessly as I thought my plan through, barely realising that I had already started to hum the lullaby that I heard

as I fell asleep this morning until I turned the corner to the portrait hallway. I stopped humming when I realised this.

"Oh shit."

And the hair on the back of my neck stood when, faintly, I heard another voice take up the tune after I had stopped humming.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

The story is starting to get darker! Which is perfect since it's almost winter here in Australia, and the days are growing shorter and colder, and there is fog outside clouding the street, so I'll be living in almost the same atmosphere as Ruffnut. In fact, I can hear the wind whistling and the windows rattling as I write here in my living room. All as I drink a pot of English Breakfast spiked with a generous helping of Baileys. A William Boyce symphony is playing in the background. It is nearly midnight.

Never fear, the story will still have a few light moments here and there because, well you know, it's Ruffnut. But it will also be dark, and mysterious. The kind of atmosphere I am aiming for is similar to the ones found in Jane Eyre (Charlotte Bronte), Wuthering Heights (Emily Bronte), Turn of the Screw (Henry James), Woman in White (Wilkie Collins), any of Elizabeth Gaskell's tales— I think you get the picture. Haven't read any of these novels yet? Well, what are you waiting for? Go and read them now! Go go go!

Special mention to **LizzyLori**, who has been reviewing every single chapter without fail. I, too, think Ruff is cheating, but after thinking long and hard about it this week, and after drafting what would happen if she didn't send the letter, I decided that there really was no two ways about: She needed to write that letter otherwise the wheels of destiny would not turn ;)

And to my anon readers: **The Cannibal Can** (hah I love your name!) Thanks for the review! Don't worry, I don't plan on stopping anytime soon :) **RedLavender08** I hope this chapter was right up your alley too :) glad you like my writing style!

Next Chapter: In which Ruffnut bumps into a certain green eyed gentleman with red-brown hair. Could he be—?

6. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 5

THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL

"Reality is not always probable, or likely."

—Jorge Luis Borges, 1899-1986—

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FIVE:

The hair on the back of my neck stood when, faintly, I heard another voice take up the tune after I had stopped humming it. The voice was

a little high, a little discordant, and it was moving away from me. I quickly ran in the direction of the disembodied voice, hoping to catch its singer and ask from which corner of the Earth that infernal lullaby came from.

But I wasn't kidding when I said that Warborough Hall was like a labyrinth. I would turn a corner thinking that the voice sounded stronger this way, only to find it so much more distant than before. Soon enough I could no longer hear the strains of the lullaby, and I was in a part of the manor that I had never been before, where all the curtains were drawn and dust cloths covered everything

I kicked the floor in frustration.

"God damn it!" I growled, stomping my way back the same way I had come from. "I knew I should have turned right, but oh no Ruffnut, you just had to turn _left_. You are such a duh-brain. Now you'll never know who was singing that tune!"

Someone suddenly barrelled into me as I passed a T-section in the hallway. I lost my balance and fell.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" I yelled.

"I am so, so sorry."

I saw a hand extend to help me up, but I swatted it away. I picked myself up and brushed myself down, glaring at this twerp. He was wearing a suit, blue tattoos just visible above his collared shirt, his red-brown hair tied back in a ponytail. There were three vertical scars across his left eye, marring what would otherwise have been a handsome face.

He looked like someone who's killed before.

"I haven't seen you around. Who the hell are you?" I asked rudely.

"I'm Dagur," he readily replied, flashing me a brilliant smile as he extended his hand again. "From _Oswald & Associates_."

"What's that, a circus?"

I chuckled. "Nope. The solicitors. You know?"

"No, actually, I don't."

He threw back his head and laughed for a good minute. I looked around, feeling incredibly uneasy. I didn't even say anything funny.

"Are you on drugs?"

"Only the legal kind," he replied, still smiling. His wide green eyes hardly blinked and never left my face. It was rather unnerving. "So, what's your name?"

"None of your business," I snapped.

"Nice to meet you, Miss None-of-your-business."

I glared at him.

"Wow, aren't you a little edgy. Did someone stick a dead cat up your ass?"

"What? You littleâ€¦!"

"Wait! Wait! I was kidding, geez!"

I clenched my fists and tried to walk around him, but he moved his body around to block me.

"Get out of my way!"

"No."

"You know, for a lawyer you sure are immature!"

"I get that a lot. I don't really care."

I tried to circle the other way, but found him blocking me again. I brought both hands up and pushed him, hard. He nearly stumbled, but managed to keep his balance. He was still grinning.

"Jesus Chrâ€¦! what the hell do you want?"

"I'm lost. I need to know where Miss Hofferson is." When I didn't respond, he continued. "I thought she'd be in the library but she wasn't there."

For a moment I was at a loss for words, and then anger took over again. "Why didn't you just _ask, _asshole?" I yelled.

"What? It was more fun this way. Soâ€¦! go on, show me the way."

"Go find your own way, I'm busy." I walked around him, and this time he didn't try to stop me.

"Busy doing what?" He asked as he followed me. I threw him a glare over my shoulder.

"Busy walking away from you."

He laughed. "Oh don't be like that, _Ruffnut."_

I stopped and spun around. "How did you know my name?"

He smiled. "Come on, you were beating yourself up pretty loudly back there. 'I'm an idiot. I'm a duh-brain. Ooh, I should have turned right!'" He mimicked.

"I wasn'tâ€¦! oh, shit." I turned around and started to walk again. I really _was _a duh-brain.

After a minute or two I couldn't hear his footsteps behind me any longer. I looked over my shoulder to check if he was still following me and had to quickly step back when I found that his face was very, _very _close to mine. "Jesus!" I exclaimed.

He put his hands on his hips, chuckling. "Sorry, I was admiring the freckles on your neck."

My face turned red in a nanosecond. "You pervert!"

"Thanks! Wow, what a compliment!"

I willed myself not roundhouse kick him in the nuts - I didn't want to get sued. And so I turned around and started to walk again. Quickly.

"You're so easy to tease, Miss None-of-your-business, a.k.a. Duh Brain," he said conversationally. "You're not from around here, are you? Where are you from?"

I kept my silence. Perhaps Miss Hofferson was still in the drawing room.

"Okay, how about: what are you doing here?"

I marched on. The sooner I found Miss Hofferson, the sooner I would be rid of this devil.

"You're not giving me the cold shoulder are you? Because I can be very, _very _persistent."

I groaned and hoped that the nightmare would pass. He continued to pester me in the background while I desperately tried to find my way back to the drawing room. Finally, I rounded the corner to where I thought the drawing room was just in time to see Missus Parsons leave it.

"Molly!" Dagur called enthusiastically.

"That's Missus Parsons to you," the housekeeper said stiffly. "I thought I asked you to wait by the stairs."

He shrugged. "I got bored, so I made my way to the library. And then I got lost. Good thing I bumped into Ruffnut here."

I sighed and slapped my hand over my forehead. Missus Parsons looked at me sympathetically. "Well, you're _late. _Miss Hofferson has been waiting for you. Follow me."

Dagur hummed. "Why are they so obsessed with time here?" He murmured to me. I felt him discreetly press himself against my side and, before I knew it, I had already punched his shoulder to get him away from me. It didn't do him any harm though, _unfortunately_, as he turned away chuckling to meet the housekeeper's bewildered gaze. "Let's get this business started, shall we? Lead the way, Molly."

"_Missus_ Parsons," she nearly growled through gritted teeth.

"Of course."

I stood rooted to the spot as I watched him enter the room. I heard him greet Miss Hofferson, heard Astrid's irritable, sarcastic response, before Missus Parsons closed the door.

"Where did Miss Hofferson find that lunatic?" I whispered.

"Trust me," Missus Parsons sighed. "His father was more agreeable."

* * *

><p>I decided to hang out with the housekeeper in the kitchen as she prepared our lunch. She seemed to know everything about Dagur and his father, and had quite the story on them. Even Paul, who came back inside to get an umbrella, had something to say about the young solicitor ("He sounds like someone who would go berserk over burnt toast!" he said before he left for the village).<p>

"Unfortunately Oswald died last year," the housekeeper was saying as she covered the simmering soup before turning the fire off. "His son Dagur took over as head of the law firm not too long ago. He's a brilliant man, Dagur, one of the best solicitors in the country. But to tell you the truth, he's more deranged than anything."

"No kidding," I said.

Missus Parsons offered me a rare smile. "Miss Hofferson trusts him, mind you, but she does not like him much," she continued. "However, before Oswald passed away, he promised the Lady that Dagur was as good a man as any, and an even better solicitor than him. Of course, Miss Hofferson decided to trust his word, since Oswald has served her for a very long time and had never given her bad advice before."

"But he's wrong. I mean, every nice parent thinks their children are better than they really are. Take my brother for instance: My mother used to think that he smelled like roses even though he never bathed."

She looked at me sardonically. "You do realise Miss Hofferson would not have stuck with Dagur if he _wasn't _anygood."

I shrugged. "I dunno."

"She wouldn't."

"Whatever. I still don't trust him."

"Neither do I, but who are we to judge him?"

"Well, we're not stupid for starters," I replied. "Because we are capable of recognising a predator when we see one. I don't know about you, but he gives me the creeps."

"It's just a first impression, we mustn't judge."

"Oh, yes," I said dryly. "Because you totally think that my first impressions of him are incorrect."

She sucked in a breath. "Miss Hofferson trusts him, and it really isn't our business to tell her who she should and should not trust."

I studied her quietly from my stool.

"By the way, about Lady Bertha Hofferson's curiosity box," Missus Parsons wiped her hand on a tea towel. "I would really prefer if I did not have to touch it. Would you come and collect it for yourself? I can show you where we keep it right now if you wish. It will save me from bringing it up to your room myself."

I raised an eyebrow. Well, well, this was interesting. What monstrosity could this box contain that repulsed even the hardiest of housekeepers?

We exited the kitchen and I followed her as she led me through a different part of the house in the first floor, past the music room and beyond. She led me to what appeared to be a room at the very centre of the house. And when we finally stepped inside I was, for lack of a better word, gobsmacked.

And impressed.

And awestruck.

I did not realise that Warborough Hall had a _weapons room_!

It was a small room, but it nevertheless inspired a frightful wonder in me. I walked up to the glass cabinet and ogled at the variety of swords, maces, spears, guns, axes, bows and arrows on display. Above it, set upon the wall, was a huge portrait of some dead old Hofferson on a horse.

"This. Is. So. awesome," I whispered.

"You're easily impressed," I heard Missus Parsons mutter. I rolled my eyes at her.

"You just led me to a _weapons room_. Of course I'm impressed"

She sniffed scornfully. "Oh don't be so surprised, this is an old house. Besides, every single Hofferson was a fighter. Miss Hofferson herself was well versed in swordplay, though she favoured the axe most."

"No way," I breathed. Can that woman get any cooler? I stared at the beautiful weapons, wondering if any of them were still sharp, forgetting about the curiosity box altogether. I could have happily spent the entire day looking and holding and testing each weapon if only the housekeeper wasn't there watching my every move.

She cleared her throat.

I sighed and straightened up, looking at her with an unimpressed scowl.

"The curiosity box," she gestured to a small box set upon a small, low table to the side of the room. It was nothing special "it was simply a small box that I would have completely overlooked if the housekeeper didn't point it out. She stepped back when I ran a hand over the lid.

I was about to open it when Missus Parsons stopped me. "Not in here!" She exclaimed. I looked at her and was surprised to see her genuinely

agitated. "Take that box with you to your room and open it there you stupid girl!"

"Hey," I shouted. "I'm not the stupid girl here who's afraid of a wooden box!"

"It's not the box, what what's inside it that I am uncomfortable with," she spat back. "And you will do well to fear it too. In fact, it will do you a lot of good if you just left it here."

"Miss Hofferson offered this box for me to investigate, _stupid," _I snarled. "And that's exactly what I'm going to do."

I saw her grind her teeth and I knew then with a childish delight that I had won this round. "Just take it up to your room," she snapped.

I smirked as I picked it up. Oh wow. It was heavier than I originally thought. I wondered excitedly what was inside. Maybe poisons. Or torturing devices. Manacles? Some exotic weapons of death from the Far Eastâ€|

She closed the weapons room behind us and walked away without saying a word. I shrugged, not really caring, and hauled the box upstairs to my room. I excitedly swept the paper on my writing desk to one side and set the box there as I kicked my shoes off to a corner.

"This is it," I whispered to myself. I opened the latch and slowly lifted the lid.

My grin disappeared.

Well, it was definitely not a treasure chest of poisons and manacles. It wasâ€| far weirder. I picked up a deck of cards on top of the pileâ€|

Suddenly, the window in front of me rattled, and outside I heard a terrifying, raspy screech. I dropped the cards as I leaned across my desk and tried to look through the sheet of grey rain on the other side of the glass. I looked this way and that.

A large shadow suddenly flew past by my window, and I stumbled back, startled. It was far too quick for me to have taken a proper look at what it was, and so I ran to the other, larger window in my room and threw it wide open. The icy rain spilled inside in a whirl of wind, and I immediately got drenched. I stuck my head out and looked to my left and right, and then below me, then above. I couldn't see a thing. Actually, it was hard to see anything beyond what was immediately in front of me. It was strange: I definitely did _not_ imagine that shadow, so what could it have been? A bird? It would have been a crazy bird of Herculean strength to have been able to battle through this storm.

The rain was slicing my face to slits.

I closed the window and shivered. Thankfully, they had placed a heater in my room, and so I turned it on at full blast and crouched down in front of it, wiping the rain from my eyes.

I looked back at the box and couldn't help but feel a little fearful.

I felt like Pandora and that I had just unleashed some secret evil into the world. I shook my head when I realised how absurd I just sounded. When that didn't abate my fear, I knocked the side of my head hard against the wall.

Ah, there. That always does the trick.

I stood up and stoutly walked back to my writing desk, my long, braided hair leaving a trail of wet patches behind me. I looked down at the simple box and, taking a deep breath, began rifling through it, placing its contents neatly on the desk.

There wasn't much, which made me wonder why the box was so heavy to carry. There was a bottle each of belladonna, garlic, and earth, a couple of vials of some dark, unlabelled liquid, a short ivory tusk of a narwhal, a crucifix, feathers and flowers bound together in brown string, a yellowing paper packet of dried grass, the small skull of a raven, a notebook, some loose paper, and the deck of cards. I also found a couple of silver coins and a small, sharp stake and, at the bottom of the box, a pentagram carved into the wood.

I nearly laughed at this assortment of knick knacks. No wonder Missus Parsons didn't want to touch this thing. It was a Victorian curiosity box, definitely, and its contents would have made any God-fearing woman today faint in fear.

It was a smaller collection than a lot of the curiosities that I had seen. It did not appear to have direction, its oddities ranging from science, to witchcraft, all the way to vampire slaying. I had a sneaking suspicion that this was not Lady Hofferson's collection in its entirety.

The loose papers were blank. Some had burnt edges or were torn in half, while others were so old it felt incredibly brittle to touch. The vials I could not open as the lid was sealed in wax " perhaps it was meant to be broken, though for what occasion I did not know. I picked up the notebook next and flicked through the pages. It was bloated with age and damaged by time, the black writing inside blotted and hard to read. I would need a fair bit of time to decipher its contents.

I next sniffed the grass in the paper packet, giggling at the thought of the Lady smoking weed in some dark corner of the manor, but found that it _was_ _just_ dried up, humble grass, perhaps even uprooted from the garden outside. I slipped it in my coat pocket, deciding that I would ask Paul if he knew what kind of grass it was and from where it came from.

I next shuffled through the cards bound in lace. It was from the major arcana set of a tarot deck, but the gold foil in the beautiful images was already starting to peel off. I briefly noted that there were a few cards missing from the pack, and so I pocketed the deck of cards to research later.

I studied the contents of the box for another couple of hours or so, noting down my observations and wondering how all of this fit in Miss Hofferson's story. I was trying to make sense of what I had seen in the window when I heard a loud bang below. I opened my door and heard a few objects crashing to the ground. I ran downstairs and skidded to a stop when I reached the banisters overlooking the foyer. Missus

Parsons and Lisa were already there. The door was wide open, and the tempest was blowing right into the house.

The housekeeper was yelling. She sounded even more cantankerous than before as Lisa tested the hinges in the door by pulling it back and forth. I crouched down low and listened in to their conversation.

"That's the eighth time this month that this has happened," Missus Parsons was growling. "If this continues, the whole front of the house will collapse!"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," Lisa laughed. "At least the hinges are still intact. See, no harm done. The workers did their jobs well."

"And look at this mess! Mud and puddles everywhere!"

"I'll help you clean up."

"The carpet is ruined! Miss Hofferson liked this carpet."

"Don't think she cares much, really," Lisa replied as she closed the doors.

"Miss Hofferson will need to do something about this," Missus Parsons said as she headed in the direction of the kitchen with the nurse. "Otherwise we might as well not have any doors at all!"

When they were gone, I stood up from my position and started to walk downstairs. I ran a hand over the heavy, solid wood and discounted the possibility of the wild wind blowing both doors open. I turned around and saw an overturned table, a vase smashed in the corner, and the carpet pulled in bunches here and there. It was as if a giant, excitable puppy bounded through the front doors and wreaked havoc with just a few sweeps of its tail.

So this was the eighth time this has happened, huh?

I was about to follow the housekeeper and the nurse in the kitchen when I stepped into a muddy puddle. I made a face.

"Oh come on!" I was still barefoot for crying out loud! But I stopped swearing when I noticed that the mud had imprinted a curious shape on the floor.

I crouched down low and examined the humongous paw "no, _claw_ print. I knew of no beast in possession of such feet. Perhaps a bear" a very, very large, extinct English bear with "uh" claws. Instead of paws.

Missus Parsons and Lisa entered the foyer once more, mop and bucket in hand. The housekeeper was still complaining aloud.

"What happened here?" I asked as I stood up. I saw the pair exchange a quick look.

"This door is old," Lisa said, putting her bucket down. "The hinges swing open by themselves, especially if there's a wind trying to get in."

I raised an eyebrow. "You honestly think I believe that? The workmen just fixed this. Besides, look at these paw prints." I bent to examine the shape. "It looks like it was made by a large creature, though what creature I do not know. But it was large and strong enough to be able to burst through those heavy doors..."

"Ah, that's nothing," Missus Parsons said, and she immediately started to mop up the mess.

"Hey!" I protested. "I was still looking at that."

"Please go back upstairs to your curiosity box," Missus Parsons said. "There is nothing else to see here."

I looked at the housekeeper, and then the nurse. I crossed my arms. "What is it that you're not telling me?"

"Please, Miss Thorston," Lisa said in a low voice, "It would be best if you don't ask questions."

"Why?"

"She means you should check your tongue and mind your own business," Missus Parsons snipped.

I stuck my jaw out, offended. "This is my business."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But it is not our business to explain."

I loomed over her, glowering, but she did not back down. "Fine," I said stubbornly. "I'll ask Miss Hofferson myself." When they did not reply I turned on my heel and walked up the stairs in righteous anger. I would have hidden once more if only they weren't watching me closely. I sighed, then sighed once more when I realised I didn't know where to find Miss Hofferson. Was she still in a meeting with Dagur?

Ugh, Dagur. He barely even knew me and he was already flirting with me? If Tuffnut was here he would have just told me to beat the asswipe up.

I thought I heard his phantom voice being carried across the corridors and, not wanting to chance bumping into him again, I slunk away into the shadows. The thought of his green eyes following me made me quicken my steps to the safety of my bedroom.

* * *

><p>That night, as I was waiting for Miss Hofferson to arrive in the library, I took a book on tarot cards down from its shelf. But as I was climbing down the ladder, my eye grazed past a shelf filled with books on mythical creatures. A large brown book in particular caught my eye.<p>

The Book of Dragons, the spine read.

I looked at it for a moment. Then, rolling my eyes at the absurdity of it all, I reached out and put it under my arm. Hey, what better place to start researching dragons than by reading a book on dragons

called _The_ _Book of Dragons, _right_?_

I settled myself on the floor and laid the tarot cards out in front of me, matching them with the ones in the book, studying the images and its meanings carefully.

_The Fool. The Lovers. The Wheel of Fortune. Death. The Star.

—

These were the five cards missing from the deck.

God, I was at a dead end: I did not know what to make of all this. I hummed, then decided to set the cards aside. I then reached for the book about dragons, quickly flicking through the first few pages. The foreword was written by some Norwegian guy named Bork, stating that most of these dragons came from the North. The book was divided into "classes" and included the dragon's speed, size, temperament, strengths, weaknesses, and something called its "shot limit". It was written as if the dragons actually existed.

The names, I had to admit, were delightful, as were the woodblock drawings that accompanied each dragon. Let's see, there was the tiny Terrible Terror and the hardy Gronkle. The Timberjack and Changewing. Skrills and Thunderdrums. Scauldrons, Nadders, and Whispering Deaths. Out of all these dragons, however, there was one in particular that really caught my imagination.

The Hideous Zippleback. Two heads, one body. One head breathed gas, the other sparked it. It was, in one word, awesome. I found myself wishing it was real so I could befriend the wild thing. I imagined myself taming it, imagined the thrill of the first flight. I traced a finger over the fearsome drawing, and it appeared to grin at my touch.

I shook my head.

_What the hell Ruffnut? _

I wished that my brother was here so that he could knock some sense back into me.

Miss Hofferson said that dragons still existed, and that all I needed to do was believe. To open my eyes and ears and to _feel_. And it must have been the lack of sleep or something but, in a sudden epiphany, in the company of hundreds of clever, dead words bound in leather, I found that I _was_ willing to believe in dragons. I found myself believing that dragons _could_ _still_ be riding the wind, if I could believe that they _still_ existed.

I desperately wanted to believe, but I did not know where to start.

I remembered the soft breath on my cheek the first time Miss Hofferson asked me to believe. I remembered the cry for attention that she heard in the drawing room. I remembered the shadow in my room. The paw prints in the foyer. Should I toss away everything that I knew was real and start to believe in the improbable? Believe that these unexplained events were all due to _dragons_?

What is this that I unleashed from Pandora's Box?

* * *

><p>The rain had started to ease up just after midnight. I was back in my room, transcribing the story that Miss Hofferson told me that night, and somewhere in the middle of this task my mind started to wander. I found myself looking at my reflection in the window from across my writing desk as I questioned everything that had happened and everything that I believed was true.<p>

In that reflection, distorted by the drops of water chasing each other down the window, I found my twin staring back at me. I looked into his eyes and asked him if I should let go and dive headfirst into Miss Hofferson's world, to dive down to its depths without fear or hesitation.

I saw the twin in the glass mouth a smartass comment. I smirked. His eyes softened as he reached out towards me. I did the same, our hands touching glass.

"Thanks, Stinky," I murmured. I bent down once again to continue my work, hearing Miss Hofferson's voice infused with each word that I transcribed.

"Lord Hofferson," wrote I, "looked down from the library and watched Astrid stalk purposefully into the woods, an axe slung over her shoulder.

"Astrid was twelve when she mastered the ancient art of axe-throwing, and she was fourteen when she finally outdanced her father at fencing. Yes, she adhered to the etiquette and the stiff societal rules of her class when she was in the company of other women. It was, after all, ingrained in her from a very young age. But when the guests were gone and she could shrug off her actor's cloak, she would pick up her axe and stalk off into the woods in search of a tree to practice on.

"No other father at that time would have taught their dainty daughters how to handle a sword or wield an axe. Gracious, no! Daughters were taught how to run households and be good, pretty wives! So why did George Hofferson teach his daughter how to fight?

"Perhaps it was his longing for a son, or perhaps it was the lack of a wife to discourage this behaviour. Maybe it was the lack of proper Englishwomen to serve as Astrid's role models.

"Or perhapsâ€| he just wanted her to be prepared for anything that might come her way in the future. She was only about three years shy of the day when he would have to present her to society. If she had to fend for herself or her children in the event of a war, or even from an abusive husbandâ€|

"He turned away from the window at the sudden vision. He would not be able to live with himself if he gave Astrid away to someone so unworthy.

"One afternoon, Astrid guiltily entered the library where her father sat writing letters. She placed her broken axe upon her father's feet and stepped back, head bowed.

"He sighed. He bent to pick up the blade, studying it. When he did not say a word after a few minutes, Astrid felt her chest tighten at having disappointed him â€" or worse, hurt him. Her father saw the glistening in her eyes and immediately drew her near.

"_Father, please forgive me,_ she said.

"_Hush, hush. Not a worry, I shall hire a blacksmith to fix this and all the other ancient weaponry that you and I have broken. In fact, I believe Lord Haddock just mentioned he knew of an excellent blacksmith in Scotland. I'm sure he wrote about it in his last letter to me... it has to be here somewhereâ€|_

"Astrid breathed out a sigh of relief at the realisation that her father was not disappointed in her. She watched him as he turned papers over in his search for the Scot's letter. Upon finding it, he allowed her to read over his shoulder as he wrote.

"And then she did not think more of it.

"But fate waits for nobody, because would you believe it? Within a short two weeks, a large, one-armed, one-legged blacksmith arrived at Warborough Hall unannounced, complaining of the weather and his hungry stomach and his stiff joints.

"A skinny boy carrying their bags stood in his shadow, curious green eyes flashing as he quietly studied the servants' astounded faces."

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Haha sorry if I've led anyone to believe that the "certain green-eyed gentleman with red-brown hair" I mentioned in the last chapter was Hiccup. In my defence, Dagur _does _have green eyes and red-brown hair too, but I think Dagur offers us a glimpse of what Hiccup would have been like under different circumstances. He is such a fun character to write, although in this fic he is less mentally unstable and murderous.

And sorry about the long wait for this chapter. I actually finished writing it on Sunday, when it was still at 3000+ words, but I wasn't happy with it. I have lost count the amount of times I have re-written this chapter, and I admit I'm still not 100% happy with it, even after it has swelled to 5500+ words. I do apologise if it's not quite as polished as the previous chapters.

However, despite the grief, I nevertheless enjoyed writing this, from the introduction of Dagur the _Deranged _all the way to the ending when Ruffnut contemplated on whether she should let go. Because it's not so much letting go of reason, but welcoming the possibility of the _improbable_ in order to see the bigger picture.

And now to my beloved reviewers:

**The Cannibal Can **Yep, you should definitely read _Turn of the Screw_. And if you enjoyed that, read _The Yellow Wallpaper _by Elizabeth Gaskell next. Want an uber spooky but short Gothic tale?

Try A Madman's Manuscript by Charles Dickens, taken from his awesome The Pickwick Papers. _

Hahahha ****LizzyLori**** you also got me giggling with your review. I find it rather hard to write creepy stuff since very few things creep me out (I still haven't seen a movie that truly spooked me) so I'm really glad you found the last chapter scary.

****Tyra****, WOW what a compliment! Thank you thank you thank you! I am so flattered by your review *o* I guess my writing style is fluent because I already have an end goal set, so all I need to do is steer the plot in that direction XD I still don't know what's going to happen between now and the ending though, so I'm taking this journey somewhat blindly along with you. But wow, once again thanks :)

And oh ****Sweettea8**** you are far too kind! I hope you'll squee as well in the next chapter. I'm dying â€" dying â€" to upload a particular scene and to hear what you think.

****NEXT CHAPTER: ****In which Astrid meets a certain blacksmith and his apprentice.

* * *

><p>PS: Here, have a BONUS DRABBLE that I wrote and posted to Tumblr one drunken night last week. Enjoy~

****The Triangle****

Ruffnut felt a pair of eyes on her. She looked over her shoulder and found Dagur staring at her in a mostâ€¦ peculiar way. Her irritation turned to surprise.

Dagur blinked, and then turned away. He shook his head as if to clear it, utterly confused at this feeling that she stirred in him.

Fishlegs watched this entire exchange from the bottom of the hill, and he felt an anxious terror well within him.

There was one common thought that crossed all three Vikings' minds.

"_Was thatâ€¦ love?"_

7. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 6

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone."_

â€" Orson Welles, 1915 - 1985

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SIX:

"The young Astrid Hofferson was upstairs in her bedroom, brushing her hair and preparing for bed, when the ghost passed through the walls and told her to make haste and go to the kitchens, for there was a strange, one-armed, one-legged man demanding food. Astrid immediately dropped her brush scampered out to the dark hallway, following the ghost and keeping to the shadows.

"Nobody noticed them as they ran silently through the manor, but when they stepped into the foyer, they heard footsteps and voices coming from one of the many corridors. The sounds were growing louder, the voices coming ever nearer. Astrid was about to run back up the stairs when the ghost pulled her towards a curtained window in the far side of the room.

"_In here! _The ghost whispered.

"And not a moment too soon, for the door opened and her father, his butler, the housekeeper, and a large man entered the room before. Astrid pulled the curtains back slightly, and her eyes widened at sight of the terrifying one-legged giant.

"_Beautiful weapons you have there, my Lord, _the large man was saying in a thick, Northern accent.

"_I hope you find Warborough Hall accommodating. _Her father replied. _You may take your pick of whichever room you wish._

"The large man laughed. _My Lord_, he said. _You are far too kind, but_ we shall be sleeping at the servant's quarters tonight, if we may._

"_No, no. Any friend of Stoick's shall receive the best of our hospitality._

"_Thank you,_ the giant rubbed a hand behind his head. _I mean no disrespect, my Lord, but I am more accustomed to sleeping in haystacks than soft mattresses, and waking up to the smell of melted iron than perfumed roses. I might get nightmares tonight if I slept in these rooms._

"_And you'll be cleaning his soiled sheets tomorrow morning, _another voice said, low and nasal. Astrid quickly tried to stifle a giggle. She peeked through the curtains but could not see who had spoken _the bulky giant was obscuring him from her view!

"The giant had smacked him around the back of his head. _This boy's sleeping at the servant's quarters too, _he muttered. _No perfumed mattresses for him._

"_Well, _whatever pleases you_, _I suppose,_ Lord Hofferson said. He seemed to be uncertain of his next actions for the next few seconds, raising his hand to the boy as if he was about to place it upon his shoulders, before dropping it again to his side. He took a half turn away, before swivelling back to the pair. Finally, he bent down to the boy and asked: _And this is also your wish? To stay at the servant's quarters tonight?_

"_Yes, my Lord_, the boy quickly said without hesitation.

"Astrid's father cleared his throat before straightening up. _Ah_

_well, I suppose thatâ€¦ er, settles it. The housekeeper shall show you to your rooms. _

"The giant â€" Gobber â€" finally stepped aside, giving Astrid her first glimpse of the boy. He was a weedy looking thing, thin arms straining under the weight of several heavy bags. He shuffled forward as he followed the two older men, but before he entered the door held open by the butler, he stopped and furrowed his eyebrows. His head suddenly turned in the direction of Astrid's hiding place. She stifled a gasp and ducked.

"After a few seconds, Astrid finally heard the door close. She waited a few more minutes before she finally dredged up the courage to look around the curtains once more.

"There was nobody else in the room.

"She edged out of her hiding place, her bare foot sinking in the carpet. The ghost behind her laughed in relief as she followed suit.

"_Well, that was interesting!_

"_That was dangerous! _Astrid hissed. _If we were found outâ€¦ I mean look at me. I am in my nightgown for heaven's sake! If we were found outâ€¦_

"_But_ _we weren't found out, _the ghost said firmly._ And you'll never be found out. Not if you're with me. I wonder if Gobber is the new blacksmithâ€¦_

"_I'm more interested in the boy_, Astrid said as they made their way back to her bedroom. _Did you see how he seemed to sense something, how he seemed to know exactly where we were hiding?_

"The ghost let out an airy laugh. _Does he sense me too?_

"_I don't know. Maybe?_

"_Maybe he knows something, _the ghost suddenly said seriously._ Maybe he knowsâ€¦ he knows aboutâ€¦ me. _

"_You think so? _Astrid asked, worried. The ghost took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"_I will find outâ€¦_

"And that was exactly what the ghost did. Gobber and the boy opened the smithy the following morning, and the ghost crept up to the rafters and watched from the shadows amidst the dust and cobwebs. She silently chuckled as Gobber and his apprentice created a great ruckus as they cleaned the place up. There were a few times when the boy would stop and look tentatively over his shoulder, feeling the ghost's eyes on him, only to find nobody there.

"_I think someone's following us, _he would hiss to Gobber, but the giant would simply grunt and tell him to stop _lazyin' about an git back to work_.

"The ghost got bored when the pair stopped their work to eat their

lunch. She crept out of her hiding place and swiftly went back to the house.

"Astrid was waiting for her in the library.

"_Well? _She asked impatiently.

"The ghost shook her head. _They're a boring couple, all they ever did today was mock each other and clean the smithy and gather coals in piles and then mock each other some more. They haven't even started working yet._

"Astrid groaned. _Did you even get his name?_

"_His name? _The ghost said incredulously, immediately understanding who she referred to. _Why are you so interested in the boy?_

"Astrid shifted her weight to her other foot. _Because I think he's, or maybe he'sâ€¦ I don't know, alright?_

"The ghost squinted at her. _Astrid, _she asked slowly. _What are you not telling me?_

"_Nothing!_

"_You're keeping something from me!_

"_No, I swear!_

"The ghost looked at her, hurt. _How could you keep secrets from me? You tell me everything!_

"_I am not lying! _Astrid said defensively. _It's justâ€¦ I do not know why he looksâ€¦ why he'sâ€¦ you know, so familiar._

"The ghost scoffed. _Impossible! He's a blacksmith's apprentice. He's not even from here!_

"_I know, _Astrid repeated. _But he still looks familiar, as if I had met him before. That is why I want to know who he is. _She sighed, looking up at the ghost from beneath her lashes.

"The ghost sighed.

"_Soâ€¦ _Astrid murmured. _Did you get his name?_

"The ghost looked at her transparently. _No. Gobber only referred to him as 'you', or 'boy', and once as 'little lord toothpick'.

—

"Astrid sniggered. The ghost smiled before disappearing back into the shadows.

"As dusk descended upon the grounds, Astrid decided that she could wait no longer for the ghost to tell her more about the boy. Damn the rules, damn being a lady of the house, damn what people will say about Lord Hofferson's daughter visiting a low-born servant, unaccompanied, and in the dark.

"She silently made her way to the smithy, but found it dark and

empty. Cursing her bad luck, she was about to head back to the manor when she saw someone sneaking about in the woods.

"_The boy!_"

"She quickly went after him, hardly making any noise amidst the crisp, dry leaves that carpeted the forest floor. The boy weaved in and out of the woods that she knew by heart, and she soon realised that he was leading her to a small clearing at the very heart of the park.

"And then he stopped and just stood there, a confused look on his face. His eyes then widened, and a soft smile played upon his lips. An eyebrow quirked as he looked sideways towards the tree where Astrid was hiding.

"_I know you're there, Miss Hofferson._"

"Astrid frowned at being found out. She glowered at him as she stepped out of the shadows, and his grin disappeared. He was suddenly fearful of the young lady in front of him.

"He started backing away from her.

"She blew a wisp of hair out of eyes and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, nearly lifting him off the ground in the process.

"_What are you doing here in the woods? _She growled dangerously.

"_Nothâ€¦| nothing!_"

"_What do you mean 'nothing'?_"

"_Well, most will define nothing as - _"

"_You're harbouring thieves, aren't you? _Astrid interrupted.

"_What? No! _"

"_What then?_"

"_Nothing! I just came here toâ€¦| to think. Andâ€¦|_"

"_Liar!_"

"_No. Please, Miss Hofferson -_"

"A thought formed in Astrid's head. _You've come to kidnap me! _She exclaimed. She threw him away from her, and he winced as he landed painfully hard against a tree.

"_Miss Hofferson, please._ He wheezed. _You're the one who followed me here, remember?_"

"_A ruse, then! You knew I would follow you!_"

"A dozen accusations spilled from her lips as the boy tried desperately to calm her down. But she would not stop snarling, would

not stop being angry. And so he did the first thing that popped into his mind in order to silence her.

"He stood up, leaned in, and pressed a finger to her lips.

"She was instantly silent, wordless with shock at the action, and the boy suddenly did not know what to do or say now that Astrid was silent. The two of them stared at each other.

"Hiccup was the first to react.

"_Forgive me, Miss Hofferson,_ he said, his finger still on her lips. _But I only came out here to the woods - to think. I swear._

"Astrid found her voice back. She harshly slapped his wrist away, her cheeks tinged in pink. _You impertinent boy! _

"_What - ?_

"_You may not touch me! Who do you think you are?_

"The boy suddenly understood her embarrassed anger. He bit his lip.

"Astrid scowled. _Get out of my sight! _

"He looked like he was about to say something, but then slumped his shoulders in defeat. _As you wish, Miss Hofferson. _He quickly walked away, head bowed.

"Once alone, Astrid slumped against a tree and let out a huff. In retrospect, she admitted to herself that she may have overreacted. However, the boy _was_ sneaking around in the woods. Why? To simply _think_? Right, and pigs have wings. It made no sense. She subconsciously tapped her lips, and when she realised what she was doing, she let out an irritated scream.

"She stalked out of the woods and back into the house before anybody started looking for her. She entered her bedroom and changed out of her sweat-stained clothes, getting herself ready for dinner. She sat in front of her mirror and ran a brush almost painfully through her golden hair.

"She heard the ghost snicker behind her. She scowled.

"_Oh shut up._"

* * *

><p>"Astrid decided to try and get an answer out of the boy once again the following afternoon after her lessons, and she decided to change tactics. Rather than be hostile, she decided to be friendly.<p>

"She found the boy alone in the smithy. He was rapidly writing something on his low table. She rapped the door sharply with the blade of her axe, and he nearly jumped out of his skin in fright.

"_Whoah! What theâ€| Oh! Missâ€| Miss Hofferson! Wha-what do Iâ€|

what do I owe the pleasure ofâ€¦ ofâ€¦ _The boy trailed off nervously and gulped.

"The girl chuckled. _Are you good with weapons?_

"_Iâ€¦ maybe?_

"Astrid hummed. She casually looked down at her broken axe, running a finger over the chipped blade before she offered it to the boy. _Can you fix this?_

"The boy took it and studied it silently for a minute before nodding. _You're fortunate that the blade is only chipped. I can easily fix that. The handle will obviously need to be replaced._

"_That is fine, as long as the blade can be repaired. It's been in my family for generations, you know. They say my mother even wielded it, when she wasâ€¦ still hereâ€¦_

"_I will handle it with the utmost care, Miss, don't you worry. _He smiled at her warmly. _But you will need to come back after I'm done, so that I can check that the new balance is right for you._

"Astrid nodded, and then an awkward silence descended upon them. The boy looked around uncomfortably.

"Astrid's lips quirked into a smile.

"_May- may I ask why you are smiling, Miss?_

"_Oh, I just noticed that you did not stammer that time. You're more eloquent when you talk about smithing._

"Naturally, the boy began fumbling through his words again, only stopping at the sound of Astrid's laughter.

"_What is your name? _Astrid asked, laughter still occasionally spilling from her lips.

"_Myâ€¦ my name?_

"_You do have a name right?_

"_I-I-Iâ€¦ doâ€¦?_"_

"_Otherwise I'm going to have to start calling you Little Lord Toothpick._

"The boy looked at her in shock. _How didâ€¦ how did you know that?
_

"_I have my sources. So is that your name?_

"_No! I mean, no it's not my name, obviously, but it's what Gobber sometimes calls me. _

"_So it's your name._

"_No!_"

"_But you answer to it?_"

"The boy sputtered. _Well yeah, no! No! It's a nickname Gobber gave m'â€¦ It's not my name andâ€¦ oh man. _He suddenly looked up to the rafters. _God! Toothless, why is it so hard to talk to girls?_"

"Astrid looked around. _Toothless?_"

"â€¦ _Uhâ€¦_"

"_Who's Toothless?_"

"_Nobody_, the boy said quickly.

"_So you're Toothless?_"

"_What? No! He's myâ€¦ he's my great uncle's friend'sâ€¦ baker'sâ€¦ spirit. _He groaned in defeat and slumped his shoulders, squinting his eyes shut.

"Astrid laughed at him. _You're so weird._"

"_I am not! _The boy fired back, and for a second Astrid had an overwhelming sense of d'Ã©j'Ã vu. She took a step closer to study his freckled face. The boy flushed and looked away.

"_Have Iâ€¦ Have we met before? _Astrid asked as she scrutinized him.

"_No, _the boy said, stepping away from her.

"_Are you sure?_"

"_Yes. I mean, come on, how is that even possible? _He looked at her sadly. _I'm a blacksmith's apprentice, and youâ€¦ you're Lord Hofferson's daughter! How could I have met you before? _

"_I don't know! _Astrid scoffed. _But I did notice that you do not speak like the other servants. _Astrid looked over at the papers on his table. _And it looks like you can writeâ€¦ and write neatly too. _She darkly added in a mutter. _I do not know that many servants who can write, or read for that matter, and you - _

"_Hiccup, _he interrupted.

"Astrid blinked. _I beg your pardon?_"

"_Myâ€¦ my name. It's Hiccup._"

"_Hiccup, _Astrid repeated, eyebrows raised.

"He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. _Uhhâ€¦ _You should probably head back to the house, Miss. It is getting late andâ€¦ I do not want any trouble._"

"Sure enough, she heard somebody call her name. She turned back to the boy and narrowed her eyes. _Hang being friendly, _she thought. Her curious stare suddenly turned threatening.

"_You're hiding something, aren't you?_"

"Hiccup gulped once more.

"_I'm keeping my eyes on you, Hiccup. You're hiding something._"

"He shrugged nervously, not refuting her claims.

"She took a threatening step towards him, but pulled back when she heard someone call her name again. She pointed to her axe. _Be careful with this. _"

"_Of course Miss Hofferson, _he said. She frowned before she turned and walked out of the smithy. He let out a sigh of relief, running his hand over his hair.

"He heard an amused harrumph from the roof.

"_Oh shut up, Toothless._"

* * *

><p>"True to her word, Astrid kept a close eye on the boy. But no matter how vigilant she tried to be, he always slipped out of her sight at varying times of the day. Gobber told her that he was off to do some chores for him, but he could not answer her when she asked him where.<p>

"When she finally cornered the poor boy in the smithy, he distracted her from her questions with her fixed axe, and she promptly forgot about her mission as they talked about balance and axe types.

"After a few more encounters, she and Hiccup began talking about archery, and fencing, and weaponry. She still asked him numerous times where he'd disappeared off to, or why she often saw him sneaking off into the woods. He would usually promptly and calmly answer her questions, as if he had been rehearsing what to tell her. And while she still doubted the truth behind his words, she decided to give him a break.

"For now.

"She would ask him again, when he trusted her more. Or when she can pounce the question on him when his guard's down. Whichever comes first.

"They often exchanged friendly banter, and although Hiccup remained guarded about his past, Astrid found that she could talk to him about almost anything. She often complained to him about the constrictive society that she was forced to live in as the daughter of Lord Hofferson. She felt that, while they were not quite close friends yet, she was comfortable enough to not feel like she had to act like a lady around him. He was just so _easy _to talk to. And, surprisingly, Hiccup turned out to be a good listener, even giving her some advice on the art of patience and evasion.

"_You're really something Hiccup, _Astrid told him one afternoon as she watched him work on a saddle.

"_Hmm? How so?_"

"_For a blacksmith's apprentice you seem to know a lot about these kinds of things._

"_What? On saddle-making?_

"Astrid rolled her eyes. _No. On how one can cunningly deal with the ignoramus of my glittering, festering world._

"He shrugged. _My mother used to tell me stories about society, _he said. _Your society, I mean. Sheâ€¦ spent a lot of time in a Lord's house. She used to tell me so many storiesâ€¦_ _about the types of people you must watch out for, and the types of people who you can trust in your world. She'sâ€¦ a remarkable woman._

"Astrid caught the sad change in his tone. She slid a stray hair behind her ear and stepped closer to him. When he did not respond, she nudged him gently with her shoulder.

"_Hey, I'd miss a loved one too if I was far away from them. And Scotland is so far away._

"He sighed. _My motherâ€¦ she's no longer here._

"_Oh! _Astrid exclaimed, immediately understanding his meaning. _Iâ€¦ I am so sorry. _

"Hiccup turned away from her, a pained expression in his face. It was obvious that the loss was very recent, so obvious that his heart was still broken. Astrid felt tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Without thinking twice, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders, hugging him sideways. He smiled at her touch, but after a few moments she realised what she had done, and immediately withdrew her hand.

"The gesture only meant to console himâ€¦ but by Jove, if somebody saw that at the wrong momentâ€¦

"She looked at him with wide eyes, aghast at her forwardness even though the gesture was only a friendly one. After a second Hiccup realised what was wrong, and he immediately coloured to the roots of his hair.

"_Iâ€¦ uhâ€¦ I'mâ€¦_

"â€¦ _Good as new? _She finished for him. He flashed her a shy grin, and she playfully punched his shoulder. They looked at each other before they burst out laughing. The sadness and awkwardness between them melted away in the knowledge of a shared loss.

"_I mean it, Hiccup, _she said as their laughter died down.

"_Hmm?_

"_You're truly something._

"_Truly, m'lady?_

"She punched his arm again.

"_Forgive me, Miss Hofferson._

"_Call me Astrid._

"He narrowed his eyes, suspecting that she was about to play a trick on him. _May I ask why?_

"_Because we are friends. _

"He was speechless for a second. _Really?_

"_Really._

"His face brightened at her words. _Friends?_

"Astrid rolled her eyes. _We are_ _friends, are we not?_

"He beamed at her, and she found his smile warm, open, and completely genuine. In that smile, Hiccup bared to her his very soul, and Astrid could not help but return his grin.

"_Astrid, _he repeated. She smirked and poked his chest.

"_Only when we're alone. I am still Miss Hofferson when we are in the company of others._

"_Of course, whatever you wish Astrid. _His eyes suddenly lit up. _Hey, can I show you something?_ He suddenly grabbed her hand, and for a second time she blushed at the contact. Half of her wanted to pull her hand back to retain some form of modesty between them, while the other half liked the feel of his warm fingers entwined with hers.

"_Follow me? _He asked eagerly.

"_Where? _

"_Just to the woods._

"_The woods? _She asked him in disbelief.

"_Yes._

"_Hiccup, I may have permitted you to call me by my first name, but I am still a lady -_

"_I want you to meet my dragon. _He interrupted.

"... _I beg your pardon?_

"He began leading her out of the smithy. _Come on, I want you to meet Toothless."_

* * *

><p>They are here, Ruffnut, as star and sky.

My head suddenly jerked up from my writing desk as I let out a mighty snore, the voice in my dream still repeating a strange, midnight

mantra inside my head.

They are here, as star and sky...

I closed my eyes for a minute, then yawned widely. I looked at my watch, thinking that it was early morning, but let out a surprised yelp when I realised that it was still night.

I had fallen asleep on top of my work. I took a deep breath as I wiped drool from my chin, and then shuffled my papers to one side. I stood up and stretched, delighting in hearing a series of cracks popping from my back. I rubbed my eyes as I stood in front of the window and looked out into the garden. A full moon hung low in the horizon, and a midnight fog wove in and out between the yew trees and the low shrubs touched with frost.

They are here... star and sky...

I felt a little disorientated, the world around me taking on a fantastical quality. The sticky tendrils of sleep was starting to lose its hold on me, but the strange mantra was still echoing in my mind...

_They are here, as star and sky... _

I went back to my desk, deciding to write while I waited out the morning.

"Astrid looked at him incredulously," I began writing, but I had to lift my head once more. I thought I heard a breath of a voice in the air. I waited for the phenomenon to happen again, but after a few minutes of silence I passed it off simply as remnants of my dream. I bent my head once more over my work.

"Astrid looked at him incredulously," I started writing again.
"_Dragon? _She asked him. _I thought you said Toothless was..."

My head snapped up again from my work as I heard a low, vibrating squawk. I had never heard such an unearthly sound in my life before. I stood up and cautiously walked to the window.

I looked out, and I could not believe my eyes.

Amidst the swirling fog, I saw a shadow of a large, winged, bird-like beast. I choked back a scream.

Aâ€¦ a dragon?

I gasped.

A dragon!

I grabbed my coat, slipped into my fluffy slippers, and ran out of my room at full speed. I did not know if I was merely hallucinating, and I didn't care. I had to confirm what I thought I just saw. I ran out of the house, down the steps and straight into the thick mist where I knew the beast must have been standing.

But when I got there, all was silent. There was nothing there.

I looked this way and that, my breath fogging in the air. My cheeks burned from the cold, my toes felt frozen beneath me, but still I turned, looking for the phantom beast.

Aâ€¦ vision?

A hallucination.

Imagined. Nothing more.

And then that infernal lullaby reached my ears. My skin prickled in fear when I noticed how close the voice was. I quickly turned around in its direction, and froze when I saw a shadow of a person walking slowly out of the fog.

The figure stopped humming, but still she continued to walk. Her pale features were slowly revealed to me, and I couldn't help but gape at her in shock.

A slight figure.

Heart-shaped face.

Brilliant blue eyes.

Noâ€¦ thisâ€¦ this is impossible.

She stopped a few steps away from me. She cocked her head to one side as she regarded me.

"Missâ€¦ Miss Hofferson?"

She stiffened at my words. "Yes," she whispered. "And no." She turned and started walking away from me.

I reached out for her, but froze when I suddenly remembered something.

Miss Hofferson could not walk. Not without the aid of a walking stickâ€¦

"Wait!" I shouted. I tore off after her, but it seemed as if she had simply disappeared into thin air. I heard no rustle of clothing or quick, retreating footsteps. The soil looked undisturbed. Even the mud where I knew she stood upon not fifteen minutes ago appeared to not have been stepped on at all!

It was absolutely impossible. Absolutelyâ€¦ improbable.

What â€" whoâ€¦ what did I see?

Miss Hofferson?

No.

I shivered violently. I knew exactly who I saw.

The Ghost of Warborough Hall.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Hiccup finally makes an appearance! The ghost finally starts being rather than simply existing! Ruff finally sees the ghost! Ruff also finally sees a dragon (well, its silhouette)! And I have finally updated! The plot is chugging along very nicely woot!

I am so sorry I haven't been updating this story. I travelled interstate quite a bit at the beginning of the month for work so I didn't get much time to write. I was originally going to upload this chapter a little earlier, but then I started working on a HTTYD lemon fic. Then I bought a graphics tablet and drawing took over my spare time. And then the HTTYD2 photos from Licence Magazine appeared, and we all know how we all spontaneously combusted after seeing that ;)

By the way, thank you ever so much to everyone who has been reading and reviewing this fic! Especially to the readers who had faved/followed the story, even during my hiatus. I am ever grateful for your support!

****Tyra:** **You were absolutely right, that skinny apprentice was none other than Hiccup! Glad you liked the Pandora's box idea :)

****Sweettea8**:** Yep it was the HxA scene that I was referring to! And to be honest it was hard to pick just one scene out of a million with regards to how these two star-crossed lovers were going to meet. Question is: Is Hiccup the Haddock boy that Astrid pushed in the mud all those years ago? Serious question, since I don't know what the answer to this is. The story could go both ways o_0

****LizzyLori:** **I hope I've retained the suspense in this chapter :D It's so easy to lose your mojo (well, for me anyway) if you haven't been "living" in the "world" for a long time. I had to reread the previous chapters before I could continue writing this one as I was so scared that I wasn't writing in the same voice XD if any of that made sense.

****RedLavender08**:** Heh I do try to write longish chapters to make up for the wait in between. This one is 4500+ words. Thank you so much for that very nice review, by the way. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy! *squee!* *hugs*

****Nightlightbee**:** I love Ruff too! She's such a fun character to watch, and study, and write about. I really wish she'd get more screen time in Defenders of Berk, maybe a Ruff-centric episode? Because even Twinsanity was more about Tuff. As for a Snotlout appearance " we shall see! ;)

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which Astrid disappears!

8. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 7

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_Life is the first gift, love the second, and understanding the third."_

â€" _Marge Piercy, 1936 -_

* * *

<p>CHAPTER SEVEN:

I stood rooted to the spot where I had met the Ghost. I looked down at the mud on which she had stepped on, and it looked like it was undisturbed.

Impossible!

The fog had curiously dissipated, but the very air around me chilled me to my bones. I looked up to see the low moon winking in and out of angry, dark clouds. Soon I felt fat droplets of rain fall upon my face. I was about to run for the manor when I saw a scrunched up piece of paper wedged between the branches of a yew tree. I pocketed it to examine later.

Suddenly, a gust of wind nearly knocked me flat on the ground. I sputtered, and tried to stand up, my eyes stinging as the icy rain got on my lashes. Another gust of wind blew, this time blowing my hair sideways, as if a great bird had flown above me towards the direction of the park. I squinted, but amidst the swirl of sleety rain I only saw a flash of blue before it was swallowed up by the dark.

I ran in the direction of the park, and immediately found myself ankle deep in a puddle. I had taken no more than three steps when I slipped in the mud. I cried out as I fell to my hands and knees.

The air around me sparked with an invisible static.

I knew I could not go further into the woods. Wherever that dragon went, it was already long gone. I crawled back to my feet and took one final look at the darkness before I walked back to the manor, shoulders hunched against the rain and the cold.

When I got back to my bedroom, I immediately turned the bath on. I got out of my sopping wet clothes and dropped them unthinkingly to the floor, rubbing my shivering body for warmth. I sneezed as the heady steam battled with the cold still clutching at my head. Once the tub was full, I immediately went in and submerged myself, the water spilling over the sides. I breathed in the scent of roses from the foams around me and I soon stopped shivering, my muscles relaxing in the water.

But my head was still full of questions.

I took a deep breath and went under the water, blocking out all sight and sound so that I was left with just my thoughts.

First, there was the question of dragons. I had seen its form, but not seen the creature itself. Was I hallucinating? Ghosts are easier to explain away, but something as large as a dragon? All evidence, all events â€" it pointed to their existence.

Perhaps they are real, after all.

I emerged from the water to take a breath, and then went under again.

Silence enveloped me.

The ghost. I could no longer tell if the figure I saw " and spoke with " was solid or incorporeal. In the fog that surrounded us it was hard to tell, but I could clearly remember those blue eyes. And that face" so gaunt and pale she appeared to me like a wraith from the underworld, her voice as frail as the winter sun.

_Miss Hofferson? _I had asked.

Yes, and no, she had replied.

What did she mean by that?

I emerged to take a breath, and went under once again.

She had disappeared, almost in front of my eyes.

Just like the governess " the ghost disappeared under her nose too, that day at the meadows.

How could she have disappeared in front of my eyes?

I heard the lullaby in my ear. Just a tune, no words. The lullaby I heard the first night I slept at Warborough Hall. The lullaby I heard at the Portrait corridor. The lullaby that the Ghost was humming.

The Ghost.

A doppelganger?

A poltergeist?

Or Miss Hofferson herself?

I reached back up for air and drowsily leaned back against the tub. I sniffed back a sneeze that threatened to explode. And then I remembered something.

The paper!

I wiped the soap from my eyes and looked around. To my horror, I found my coat drenched and lying in a puddle of rose-scented water. I scrambled and nearly slipped as I reached for it, and as I picked it up I was dismayed to find it absolutely dripping wet. I carefully took the piece of paper from one of the pockets and found it stuck to something. I peeled it off, and the blood drained from face when I realised what it was stuck to.

It was the packet of dried grass, from the curiosity box.

Ah crap.

Miss Hofferson is going to kill me!

I very carefully laid both the scrunched up piece of paper and the paper packet on the sink to dry, and then climbed back in the water as I cursed at my clumsiness. My god, if I wasn't the most thick-headed girl in the whole of Earthâ€¦

I went back in the water for another hour, stewing in my thoughts and self-aborrence, and I would have been happy to stay there for another hour, but my skin had started to prune and the water far too lukewarm for comfort. I stepped out and wrapped myself in a lush bathrobe. I prodded the pieces of paper to check how it's drying up, and winced when I saw that it was starting to wrinkle and curl.

The housekeeper was going to be knocking at my door any moment, I was sure, so I decided to prepare for the inevitable summons. I dressed quickly and waited. The rain had once more turned to mist, and the sun was blearily blinking down upon the grounds. It seemed as if the whole world had an underwater clarity to it.

I sneezed before I rubbed my eyes. Reality seemed to have a strange hold over Warborough Hall.

I sat in my room and waited. And waited. And waited. But Astrid did not send for me that morning, or the next, or even the next. Neither the housekeeper nor the gardener would tell me where she was. Not even Lisa knew. All they told me was that "the Lady would be back any time now", so I "best stay put and wait."

And so I could not ask her about the dragon or the Ghost, or the curiosity box and her story. All I could do was decipher the notebook I found in the box and read up on dragons and the occult and transcribe what was left of our last session while I waited for her to return. Once I went to the village to snoop around, but was disappointed when I found the older residents - those who would have known Miss Hofferson in her youth - extremely reserved when asked about what they knew of "the family" and "the big house".

When the scrunched up piece of paper dried up, I was dismayed to find that while there _was _writing on it, the water had made it largely illegible. The damp had warped and diluted the sentences beyond recognition. All I could make out were a few S's here and there.

The packet, on the other hand, was a different story. The grass had turned to mush and stained the packet once it had dried considerably. I sighed miserably: It was beyond saving. I would just have to bite the bullet and face Miss Hofferson's wrath when she finds out.

I sought Paul to ask him to identify the plant within. He took a smidgen and rubbed it between his fingers, sniffed it, and raised his eyebrows. He told me that it was a type of wildflower- and there were patches of it growing everywhere in the woods.

"But you won't find this in my garden", he said proudly to me, and it made me wonder why Astrid's mother kept dried wildflower in her curiosity box.

I seemed to have also developed a heady cold, but it was nothing that I could die from. And so on days when the lead-coloured sky did not empty its heavy bowels upon us, I would walk around the grounds and the woods, stuffed nose and all, as I tried to trace the path that

the Ghost must have taken, or the direction that the bird-like dragon had flown. I revelled in the atmosphere that surrounded me, for there was a thick fog that descended once more upon the estate. Once or twice, when I was so deep in the woods that I had to squint to see the path, I could almost believe in ghosts and shadows moving in the swirling mist. I sometimes heard unnamed sounds all around me, only to find a deer stopping in its tracks to regard me curiously.

Perhaps the most interesting things that happened in Miss Hofferson's absence were the feelings of being watched and followed. Outside (and especially when I was alone in the woods), I would sometimes feel something large following me. Mind you, it wasn't really a foreboding feeling. Quite the opposite, actually. I felt like it was protecting me. As if the entity was a friend. There was one time when I burped loudly, thinking that I was all alone in front of the lake, when I felt something nuzzle my back as the air around me sparked with a strange static quality. I swear I almost heard a snigger.

It was different inside, however. I felt like I was being watched by a darker, more curious entity. It made me uncomfortable, though it didn't feel entirely sinister. Just a little curiouseer. I would sometimes be bent over my writing desk and feel the prickly breath of somebody looking over my shoulder, only to look around and find that I was all alone in my room. I would walk past hallways and hear doors closing behind me. Footsteps would follow me. The lullaby would entangle itself in my web of dreams so that I awoke every morning with the tune on my lips.

I also welcomed these frightening events, believe it or not. Don't ask me why though. Maybe I was just going mad.

It had started to rain once again on the fifth night as I sat in my room, my feet pointed towards the heater. I was thoroughly engrossed in the blank scraps of paper from the curiosity box, trying to figure out what it was for. I tried putting it against heat, but no invisible writing appeared. It was rather odd for these scraps to be part of the collection â€" it felt like it didn't belong there. My next step was trying to figure out if it was torn from the old notebook that lay open in my other hand, or â€"

My phone suddenly rang loudly from my desk.

"Son of a -!" I dropped the scrap of paper in surprise. It felt like my heart was thudding straight out of my chest. For a moment, I stared at the phone as if it was an alien thing, since I had pretty much given up on ever getting any mobile coverage here and so had forgotten that I even had a phone. I eventually came to my senses and scrambled to my feet, answering it upon its sixth ring.

"Hello?"

"â€" Ruffnut?"

_Oh my god! _"Fishlegs!" I yelled through my stuffed nose. "Holy crap Fishlegs your phone call got through! I can't believe -"

"What? Canâ€" can you say that again?" He shouted. The line started to crack.

"I said: I can't believe your phone call went through!"

"You're kind of breaking up Ruff," he interrupted. "Listen, I just want to say I got your letter, and I—" Silence.

"What? Hey! Are you still there?"

"—and it's amazing that I need to do more research on their son was—"

Then the line went dead. I stared at my phone in disbelief. I was positive he was just about to tell me what he had found out about the Haddocks —" and about the son no less —" and the line just had to go dead? I couldn't believe it! I screeched in frustration and started swearing at my phone. _No! Piece of shit._ _This can't be happening!_

There was an urgent knock at my door. I walked over to it still swearing and yanked it open.

"What do you want - Oh, sorry Lisa."

The nurse had stepped back in alarm at my outburst. "I heard you shouting and thought that something had happened."

I sighed. "Sorry. Um, yeah. Nothing happened. I just got a phone call, from a good friend, and he was just about to tell me something awesome, but the reception here is so bad that he got cut off before he even got to the good parts."

"Oh dear. I'm surprised you even received his call."

I shrugged.

"I guess it was a very important phone call?"

"Yep, I'm — pretty bummed out."

She smiled sympathetically. "If he's serious, he will ask again. Don't you worry."

I scrunched my eyebrows together in confusion. And then I realised what she was implying. "Oh no! Oh, god, no. He's just a friend."

"Oh!" She exclaimed, blushing at her mistake. "I'm so sorry." She looked at me apologetically. "If it is any consolation, I also came by to inform you that Miss Hofferson has returned."

I immediately perked up, then sneezed. My heady cold had not gotten better. "When did she get back?" I asked thickly. "Will she see me now?"

"She just arrived about half an hour ago, however she is tired from her journey. I will assume she will ask to see you tomorrow."

I frowned in disappointment. "Well, alright. Did she say where she went?"

"She did not say."

"Can _you _say where she went?"

"No."

"You can't, or won't? Or may not?" I added as an afterthought.

"Can't," she repeated. "I honestly do not know where she went."

I squinted my eyes at her, but decided to let it go. I had no choice but to believe her.

I closed the door after our conversation with more questions in my head than ever before. I looked back down at the phone in my hands and wondered how I would be able to get hold of Fish again.

* * *

><p>As Lisa predicted, Miss Hofferson called for me the following morning, though at a later hour than usual. We met at the library, and upon entering I was greatly surprised to see her looking so much more fragile in the short period of time that I did not see her. She looked thinner, her lips chapped. Her skin looked taut over her bones, and she seemed to be exhausted. Despite all these, though, her eyes looked more alive than before. It was as if she had been revitalised by her absenceâ€| or perhaps I was finally, truly seeing her soul, revealed by what old age is stripping away.<p>

"I apologise for my sudden absence, Miss Thorston," she said once I was seated.

"It's okay, I was kept busy," I settled in the couch a little more comfortably. "Where did you go?"

"I will tell you later. Did anything happen while I was away?"

Where do I even start?

"I think I've finally seen a dragon," I began, my eyes watching her carefully for amusement or shock.

But her face, instead, brightened. "Indeed?"

I hesitated. "Well, let me rephrase that. I _think _I saw a dragon. It was big, and bird-like... it could have been blue but it was much too dark to be sure. And I only saw its silhouette... and, uhâ€| yeah. No." I bit my lip. "Iâ€| haven't actually seen the dragon. Just thought I saw one."

"Ah. But you must have seen a Deadly Nadder."

"Or maybe it's all in my head."

She gazed at me. "You still do not believe?"

I was silent. I did not know how to answer that â€" I was still far too conflicted inside.

"It is funny, is it not?" She murmured. "The human mind, once conditioned, will find it hard to let learned knowledge go, even when presented with truth. The only thing that never truly changes is instinct in its deepest, purest form." She leaned closer to me. "I cannot tell you if what you had seen was a dragon or not. Only you can answer this. But if all else fails, if everything else does not make sense â€" trust in your instinct. Trust in yourself."

I let her words swirl in my head for a while.

She sat back. "Anything else?"

I paused. "Yeah," I responded after a while. "You were there."

This time she raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"You tell me."

She pressed her lips together amusedly.

"Was it you?"

"Yes, and no."

Her answer knocked back the sarcastic response that I had readied on my lips. I blinked at her. "Iâ€| beg your pardon?"

"I have a knack for sleepwalking, Miss Thorston. Always did ever since I was a young girl. So if I told you she was me, would you believe me?"

I paused. "Iâ€| suppose?"

"But?"

I sighed. "But even if you _had _sleepwalked, you would not have gotten far."

"Why?"

I gestured to the walking stick leaning against her armchair.

"Would it be better if I told you she was a ghost?"

I hesitated, and she hummed.

"Think about it, Miss Thorston."

I groaned. "I hate riddles."

She chuckled. "May I ask you something? You will sooner believe in ghosts than dragons?"

A "no" was ready upon my lips, but then I stopped myself, because it was not the truth. I _was _more ready to believe in ghosts than dragons. It was, perhaps, because it was the more probable of the two.

And so I replied a "yes", and she hummed once more. In

disappointment? In amusement? I was not sure.

"Think about it," she repeated.

I leaned forward and fixed her an intent look. "And you, Miss Hofferson? Will you tell me where you went to this past six days?"

"I went all around the country," she readily responded. "Stormfly was feeling a little moody â€" she desperately wanted to fly with me. And I had to check on the welfare of the dragons in the surrounding areas."

"Stormfly?"

"Oh, I apologise. Stormfly - my dragon."

"And there are dragons... in surrounding areas?"

"Yes."

I blinked, and she looked back at me, daring me to challenge her. I decided to be wise and kept my mouth shut. I had, after all, seen the silhouette of a huge creature not a week agoâ€|

Miss Hofferson drew the shawls closer to her thin body. "Shall we begin our session? We have lost enough time as it is."

She took a breath, and barely had I poised my pen upon my notebook, when she began to weave her magic once more.

* * *

><p>"Hiccup led Astrid by the hand through the woods, and she soon found herself standing in the clearing in the middle of the park â€" the very same clearing where she first spoke to the boy. She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows impatiently.<p>

"_Wait here, _he said. He cupped a hand over his mouth, but then lowered it again as he self-consciously looked back at her. _And don't laugh_.

"_As long as you do not do anything stupid, _she reassured him. _What are -?_"

"Her voice was cut off abruptly by the sound of Hiccup yowling into the woods. It was horrible, and unbelievably loud, and she pressed her hands to her ears to subdue the sound until the echoes had ceased completely.

"_Hiccup, if you had told me you wanted to sing I wouldn't have agreed to come here._

"_I wasn't singing! _He said prickly. _I was calling Toothless._

"_Yeah, right, and that was supposed to be a dragon's call? You sounded like a cat in heat!_"

"_I did not!_"

"_Did to._

A crash was suddenly heard from nearby, and Astrid immediately whipped around in the direction of the sound.

"_Whatâ€¦ was that?_"

"Hiccup grinned proudly. _That would be Toothless! Hey bud! _He walked towards a tree and looked up. _Come on down, bud, she's a friend._

"Astrid looked up at the boughs, but could see nothing. _Who are you talking to? _She asked incredulously.

"Hiccup looked back at her. _That would be__ Toothless. You see him? That big black reptile up there. More like an overgrown cat though than a dragon if you ask meâ€¦ ow!_ He yelped when a branch suddenly fell on top of his head. _Hey!_ _Not funny! _He shouted up atâ€¦ nothing Astrid could see.

"Astrid looked back at him as if he had completely lost his mind. _Hiccupâ€¦ there's nothing there._

"His grin faltered. _You can't see him?_"

"_What is it exactly am I supposed to be seeing?_"

"_I told you, that big black dragon up there._

"Astrid squinted up and, seeing nothing, gave Hiccup an exasperated look. _Is this some kind of a joke?_"

"_No, _he said faintly. _No it's not._

"Astrid glared at him and clenched her fists. But when she saw him gravely looking back at her, she dropped her hands to her side. _Hiccup? There'sâ€¦ there's nothing up there._

"_This can't be, _he muttered, looking back up the tree. _You're with me, and you're still young. You should be able to see him._

"Astrid slowly moved closer to him, her eyes betraying her confusion and fear. _Hiccup?_"

"He sighed. He appeared to listen to something, sighed once more, then looked at Astrid. _It's nothing. I'm justâ€¦ I'm just being... you know, the usual._

"Astrid shrugged. _Don't worry, _she said, trying to cheer him up, _I've gotten so used to your weirdness, that it'll be weird if you suddenly stopped being weird. _

"The comment earned her a small smile.

"However, for some reason not entirely related to the boy, she felt chilled, anxiousâ€¦ and a little jumpy. There was a voice in the back of her mind telling her to run away, to run as fast as she could, for there was a wild creature yet unnamed and very dangerous lurking nearby. She fought to push the feeling down.

"Let's go home, s_he murmured, her eyes darting here and there, looking for the danger that she could feel.

"Hiccup was completely oblivious to her anxiety. _Yeah, _he mumbled, _Alright_. They started walking back to the manor, and in the silence Astrid thought she could hear the soft crunch of footsteps following them. She stopped and looked back.

"_Did you hear that?_"

"_Hear what?_"

Silence.

"Astrid's blue eyes scanned the woods, and after a minute she started walking again, though Hiccup noticed that she was walking faster this time, and wondered if she saw a glimpse of the dragon. He tried to keep up.

"_Astrid?_"

"_It's nothing, _she muttered. _I guess I'm just a little jumpy._"

"They walked on, but just as the manor came into view, she heard a crash behind them. She spun around, wishing heartily that she had taken her axe with her, when a huge, black shadow flickered faintly in the sunlight and appeared to bound straight at her.

"Astrid shrieked in surprise, backed away, and stumbled. Hiccup gasped and moved in front of her, his arms outstretched, hissing a reprimand at something that Astrid could not see.

"_Toothless! Bad dragon â€" no slobbering. No pouncing. No!_"

She pulled herself up and wildly looked around, trying to catch the black creature that very nearly tackled her to the ground not a moment ago.

"_Astrid! Astrid, hey, are you alright? _Hiccup asked, cautiously making his way to her. His other hand was now stretched towards her, knowing better than to make any sudden movement to a _very_ panicked creature.

"_I sawâ€¦ I sawâ€¦ _Astrid's heart raced as she spun around in circles.

"_What did you see? Tell me: what did you see?_"

"_A black shadow, _she said. _Faintly, in the sun. It was about to attack us, but then it justâ€¦ disappeared._"

"_You don't see it anymore? _"

"Astrid shook her head.

"Hiccup laughed, and she misunderstood it as him laughing _at _her. She marched up and punched him in the arm. Hard.

"_Ow! What was that for? No, Toothless! _He suddenly hissed, his hand once more held up to something that she could not see.

"_Who are you talking to?_"

"_Toothless, I told you - _"

"_No, stop it!_"

"_What?_"

"Astrid growled. Hiccup suddenly laughed once more.

"_You saw him!_"

"_Stop laughing at me!_"

"_No! I am not laughing at you. _"

"_Then you're making a fool out of me, _she said, and she hated how her voice quivered with hurt.

"_Astrid, no! Listen, I believe you. Because you've just seen Toothless -_"

"Astrid snarled. _Enough! _"

"_But you did! How can you otherwise explain the shadow?_"

"_The shadow was nothi â€" _"

"_It wasn't nothing. Don't you see, Astrid? _Hiccup grinned excitedly at her. _You just saw your first dragon!_"

"_I said enough!_"

"_Can I just try something?_"

"_No. _"

"_Please? Give me your hand. _"

"Astrid slapped his arm away. _No, _she growled.

"Hiccup looked at her, wounded. _Iâ€" I thought we were friends. _"

"Astrid glared at him. _I said stop it, Hiccup. _"

"_But -_"

"_Stop it! Just â€" just - augh! _ She brought her hands up and growled up to the heavens in the most unladylike way imaginable before she angrily fled back home. He watched her make her way back to the manor, rubbed his neck and glared at the dragon sitting innocently next to him.

"_Oh, very good, Toothless. You just had to be an excitable puppy today, didn't you? _Hiccup grumbled.

"The dragon grumbled back.

"_And what's with the stalking?_"

* * *

><p>"Astrid snuck around the kitchen door and had to suppress a scream when a pale hand grasped her arm and pulled her to the pantry.<p>

"It was the Ghost.

"_I saw it, _she said excitedly.

"_What? _Astrid asked, trying to still her racing heart.

"_The dragon._"

"Astrid scoffed and made to get away, but the Ghost pulled her back in. _You're not going to tell me about it?_"

"Astrid stiffened. _Please, don't make a fool out of me too._"

"The Ghost paused. _You didn't see it?_"

"She angrily tried to pull her arm back, but the Ghost simply tightened her grip. _You did not see it?_"

"_No, I didn't see it! _Astrid hissed._ I didn't see any dragon. All I saw wasâ€¦ wasâ€¦ _She growled. _Please, don't make a fool out of me too._"

"_I'm not, Astrid, _the Ghost whispered. _I only saw it from one of the rooms upstairs, from afar, just as you and Hiccup were walking out the woods. I saw it bound towards you, saw you stumble backâ€¦ I thought you saw it too._"

"Astrid looked at the Ghost. _I saw only a shadow of something about to pounce at me, _she said hesitantly. _But when I got back on my feet, it was only Hiccup and me once more._"

"The Ghost released her arm and frowned in thought. Astrid was about to say more when a most unwelcome voice called from beyond the pantry door.

"_Astrid? _Hiccup entered the kitchen, and both Astrid and the Ghost ducked, shuffling back to where the bags of grains were kept. Astrid cursed her recent growth spurt: This hiding place was starting to prove uncomfortable now that she was taller.

"_Astrid? _"

"She held her breath, not making a sound.

"_You need to give me chance to explain. _Hiccup hissed.

"She could feel the Ghost shuddering next to her in suppressed laughter. She glared at her in the darkness.

"_Astrid where are you? _"

"Silence. How did the boy know she was hiding in the kitchen?

"_Astrid?_"

"He was standing near the pantry doors. A few more steps and..."

"_That's Miss Hofferson to you, boy! _"

"Hiccup jumped at the voice and spun on his heels to face the cook, who suddenly seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. She heaved a basket of vegetables from the garden onto the kitchen table.

"He fumbled through his words.

"_Iâ€¦ Iâ€¦ _"

"_Who do you think you are, calling our little Miss by her Christian name?_"

"_Ohâ€¦ umâ€¦ oh, of course! Of __**course**__, it's Miss Hofferson! _He laughed nervously._ Notâ€¦ not Astrid. I mean, she's the lady of the house after all â€" So she __**should**__ be called Miss Hofferson. Don't you worry, I won't be calling her Astrid ever again._"

"_You just did. _"

"â€¦ _oh yeah._"

"The cook raised a bemused eyebrow. _Get out of here, _she jabbed a thumb to the door, and Hiccup quickly left, glad to be away from the woman's glare.

"The cook hummed a tune, and when she was sure that Hiccup was out of earshot, began to laugh aloud. _You can come out now, miss. The boy's gone._"

"Astrid slowly opened the pantry door and brushed herself down. _How did you know I was hiding in there?_"

"The cook gave her a deadpanned look. _I have known you since you were a babe, and I know all your antics and hiding places. Of course I know._"

"Astrid sighed resignedly.

"_Besides, your dress was peeking out from under the door. _"

"Astrid quickly glanced down.

"_Good thing Hiccup wasn't looking at the floor, hmm? Next time you should hide better!_"

"Astrid groaned. _Thanks._"

"_Why were you hiding from him anyway?_"

"_He was pestering me._

"The cook smiled down at her knowingly. _Ah._

"'_Ah' what?_

"_It is true then._

"_What is?_

"_There is nothing like young love._

"Astrid gaped at her, then growled irritably as she ran away. The cook laughed. _And_ _youth is wasted on the young! _She called after her.

* * *

><p>"Astrid did not run into the boy again for the rest of the day, and she made sure she did not run into him the following day, or the next, even though he was trying so hard to get her attention. She visited neighbouring estates with her father to keep herself busy, and after four days her anger abated, though her embarrassment still remained.<p>

"The Ghost could not understand why she was acting like so. _Just give him a chance to speak with you. It might even give you peace._

"Astrid gave the Ghost a flat 'no'. Besides, ladies did not go around making friends with blacksmith's apprentices. That was unbecoming of a lady. _That_ was just inviting all sorts of bad.

"On the fifth day, she decided to visit her favourite training grounds in the woods. She went the long way around, skirting the stables and the gardens and the forge to avoid accidentally bumping into Hiccup. As she neared her favourite tree, however, she was disappointed to hear his voice echoing in the woods. She sighed grouchyly and was about to turn back when she heard him say her name. She hugged her axe close against her body and hid behind a tree to listen.

"â€| _if only I'd remembered that one thing, she'd be able to see you right now._

"A strange warble responded to him.

"_I mean, she could hear you. And she saw you, though very faintlyâ€" just sit still will you? I'll never get this saddle on you properly._

"Saddle?

"Astrid heard another strange croon, and then a loud, dry, inhuman snort.

"_Yeah, yeah. Most people never learn to see dragons. But I think she can learn. And you saw her. You sensed her before I even knew she was â€" keep still you useless reptile! _

"She heard what sounded like slap, heard Hiccup yelp, and then a strange _sniggering._

"What in heaven's name is going on?

"_Ah! _She just needs to believe. _Hiccup said quietly. _Ah, that should do it. You ready, bud? _He asked in a lively voice, sounding like he was trying get someone excited. _Yeah? No, are you __**really**__ ready? Yeah? Yeah! Come on! Come on!_

"She heard a strange barking sound, and curiosity overcame her. But just as she swerved around the tree, a cloud of dust suddenly blew from the middle of the clearing. She shut her eyes tightly and coughed out the dirt that clung to her throat. When she could finally open her eyes, she saw the trees and the shrubs in the clearing swaying in the sudden wind, as if something had launched up to the sky at an incredible speed.

"She looked up and saw a black speck quickly being swallowed up by the gathering clouds. She looked up to the sky even though the black speck had disappeared a long time ago. She looked up and thought. And thought. And thought.

"Astrid Hofferson was a Hofferson through and through: She did not believe in anything she could not easily perceive.

"But this time, understanding dawned on her.

"Stubborn, hot-headed child she may have been, but she was not going reject something she knew she truly saw just because it went against everything she knew was real. No. She was going to tackle it head on, fearlessly and curiously. It was exactly like when she first perceived the Ghost.

"And this time, she was not going to tell her father."

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Oh my god did anyone see that new teaser? Of course you have! Everyone's just talking about how hot Hiccup got (and yes Hiccup does look mighty fine), but honestly there were only two things running through my head the entire time I was watching it: 1. Hot damn that water looks so real I can't believe it's not butter, 2. Omg Toothless you cute little snapper _" you look so happy and free and just absolutely thrilled to be flying with your best bud, and that happiness was so infectious and liberating that I felt like I've just flown through the skies too.

Well done Dreamworks. Well done *wipes tears*

Anyway: Fyeah 5000+ words! (I honestly couldn't stop writing _" this was originally 6000+ words too yikes!)

Fyeah Fishlegs!

And fyeah Toothless, you cute little wingman of a reptile you!

Thank you once again to everyone who has followed, faved, and

reviewed the story so far :)

Nightlightbee: Oh man I know what you mean! most of the stories I've been following have not been updated in a while either :(I've been waiting for the next chapter to my favourite HTTYD fic for a long, looong time now. It's an M-rated fic though, so I'm not sure if I'm allowed to plug it here since this is T-rated \

Sweettea8: Thanks :) haha did you nearly die too when the teaser came out? Just wait, we'll ALL die once they release an extended trailer, and then come back to life when HTTYD2 hits cinemas, then die again when HTTYD3 news is released, then come back to life again when they release a teaser for that. At this rate we'll all be zombies by the time HTTYD3 comes out XD And yep, I will be uploading the lemons " and they will absolutely be Hiccupstrid :)

RedLavender08: hugs I'm sorry for your loss. I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to.

Tyra: Oh wow really? I am! gosh, I am so flattered. Thank you so much sweetie! squeee!*

hpnarutardsjedipirate1234: As you wish! claps hands Chapter 7 poofs into existence*

Cat Eyed Blunder: Thank you so much for your reviews! Glad you like the quotes " It's really fun looking around for the perfect quote that best foreshadows each chapter. And about the "He stood up, leaned in, and pressed a finger to her lips" line: I, uh! didn't really mean to be sneaky! Hahaha! Now that you mention it, it does sound like he was going to lean in and give her a kiss. Knowing Astrid, though, that kiss would have quickly turned ahem muddier ;)

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which a Christmas party happens - and you're invited ;P

9. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 8

THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL

"The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when you discover that someone else believes in you and is willing to trust you with a friendship._"

! Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803 - 1882

* * *

><p>CHAPTER EIGHT:

"Astrid did not see Hiccup again for the rest of the day, and she could not help but notice the irony that now it was she who was seeking him out. She did not see him for nearly a week, and even Gobber had given up making excuses for him, though he did not appear

at all concerned that his apprentice kept disappearing with nary a word.

"The following week, her father took her once more to visit a few families nearby. She did not want to go " she wanted to be at Warborough Hall the minute Hiccup was back. Besides, she was not so blind to see what her neighbours were trying to do, although she did not understand why her father was giving matchmaking a try as well.

"Yet Astrid was also painfully aware of her duty, and the rules, and society's expectations of her, and her love for her father was far too strong to rebel against. And so she endured making small talk with the neighbours' children, all of whom were dull, or self-righteous, or self-centred. They said that a lady of fifteen needed to be surrounded with other ladies her age, and perhaps she might even take a shine to one of their sons. She was only three years shy of being presented to society after all, and the sooner she could fall in love the sooner they could get their hands on the Hofferson title and fortune.

"It was not until the fifteenth night since Hiccup disappeared when Astrid finally arrived back in Warborough Hall. It was late, and she was tired, and so she trudged up to her bedroom without noticing that there were now two silhouettes working at the forge.

"Much later that night, as she was brushing her hair in front of her looking glass getting ready for bed, she heard the patter of a pebble hitting her window. She froze and waited for it to happen again.

"There was a moment of silence, and then another pebble hit the glass.

"She quickly edged towards the window, her breath quickening, her hairbrush still in hand. She looked down towards the grounds. Her brows knitted together as her blue eyes scanned the darkness, her breath fogging the glass.

"It was a cloudy night, and she could not see a thing.

"She made a hum of confusion as she turned back to her mirror to put her hairbrush down.

"_Astrid! _Someone hissed.

"She spun around. _That voice_! She ran to the window, completely forgetting her state of dress, and flung it wide open.

"_Hiccup? _She whispered. _Hiccup! Where are you?_"

"_Down here!_"

"_I can't see you!_"

"She heard shuffling.

"_I still can't see you._"

"_Come downstairs then!_"

"_Oh no, you are not commanding me. _She said childishly. _You come up here! _

"_You know I may not enter the house! Not at this late hour - your father will feed me to his hunting dogs!_

"_Just climb up the wall then, it is easy. I have done it many times before._

"She heard Hiccup sputter, and Astrid couldn't help but goad him.

"_Or do you need Toothless to help you do something that I can do blindfolded? _

"_Or perhaps you could let down your hair so that I may climb up? _

"_Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin._

"_Well maybeâ€¦ huh? _She imagined his face scrunching up in confusion. _I don't think we're working on the same fairy tale here._

"_Just climb up, Hiccup. _Astrid said. After being so long in the company of teetering ladies and obnoxious gentlemen, his dry sense of humour and his peculiar way of speaking was like a breath of fresh air.

"Which was why his hesitation was getting on her nerves.

"_Into yourâ€¦ into your bedroom? _Hiccup positively squeaked.

"_Yes, justâ€¦ don't make a sound, or I'll feed you to my father's hunting dogs._

"She heard him sigh, and she watched on amusedly when he emerged from the shadows as he climbed up, his limbs shaking with exertion. Though she dearly would have loved to, she did not laugh at him for the sake of their friendship, made feeble due to her stubbornness. When he finally scrabbled over her window, she bent down and grinned at him, her face still red from suppressed laughter. She suddenly realised that she was only in her nightdress, and that she was alone, in her bedroom, with a _boy._

"This was so forbidden! _So _forbidden. She quickly drew the loose folds of her dress around her and crossed her arms. She waited for him to catch his breath.

"And he suddenly seized up to clutch his right leg.

"_What's wrong with you? _

"_I thinkâ€¦ my â€" my leg has cramped._

"This time, Astrid did not hold her laughter in, which was a mistake, for she laughed quite loudly and deeply. And it was also unfortunate that her governess decided to pass by her room at that very moment,

and heard Hiccup's pitiful groan of pain.

"She pursed her lips and knocked at her door. _Astrid? _

"Astrid clamped both hands over her mouth.

"_Don't worry, she will not open my door without my permi-"_

"_Is there something wrong, Miss Sawyer? _The voice of her father rumbled through the door, and her governess replied back. Hiccup's eyes widened, and Astrid blanched, but only for a moment, for she was once again grinning deviously at him in the blink of an eye.

"_Uhhâ€| Astrid? _He stuttered, not liking the look on her face one bit.

"_Under the bed, _she pushed him. _Quickly!_

"_Ow! Astrid!_

"_Astrid? _Her father knocked.

"_Hurry! _

"Perhaps fear gave his knees flight, because Hiccup managed to crawl _very _quickly, even with one cramping leg. And not a moment too soon, for Astrid, without waiting for him, had already run across the room to open the door before he had even reached the bed. He quickly dove under, his nose filling with dust mites.

"He willed himself not to sneeze.

"_Father, Miss Sawyer, _Astrid murmured enchantingly. _What brings you to my bedroom this fine evening?_

"Her father sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. _Not now, Astrid. Miss Sawyer says that she heard voices in your room: Who were you talking to?_

"_Mmâ€| just a ghost._

"_The ghost? _Her father said dubiously, and for one heart stopping second Astrid thought that he saw straight through her lie.

"Astrid attempted to seem uncaring. _Though most people will say that ghosts do not exist. Therefore, I have been speaking with nobody._

"_Indeed? _Her father asked drily.

"_I very clearly heard another voice, _her governess insisted.

"_Then perhaps it was the fairies! _Astrid cocked an eyebrow. _Or are you accusing me of harbouring fugitives in my own bedroom?_

"_Astrid! _Her father and governess gasped, and even Astrid's eyes widened at her unthinking words. She looked down and picked at the

long sleeves of her nightdress.

"_Forgive me, that was very rude of me, _she relented.

"_Indeed it was, _her governess said. She had never spoken to her like that before " whose company was she keeping that taught her such awful manners? Surely not the surrounding families' children. If not them, then" |

"The blacksmith's boy.

"Mary Sawyer's eyes narrowed. She was going to have a word with that boy tomorrow.

"Her father was also looking at her with narrowed eyes. _Just go to bed Astrid, _he muttered. _No more talking. No more ghosts. Just " bed._

"_Yes father. See? _She ran, switched off the lamps, and dove under the covers. _Bed, just as you commanded._

"Her father and her governess looked at each other, then, sighing, closed the door and walked away.

"Hiccup let out a mighty sneeze.

"Astrid grinned as she poked her head under her bed. She looked at the miserable boy upside down.

"_Are you alright? _She whispered.

"_Never better._ Hiccup sneezed again.

"_Be quiet, I haven't locked the door yet. _She scrambled to her feet and lightly ran in the dark. Once her door was locked, she turned back to Hiccup, who was crawling out from under her bed, his auburn hair powdered grey.

"_Don't they ever sweep your room?_ He hissed as he shook his hair out, a cloud of dust swirling all around him.

"_They do, they just sweep the dirt under my bed. _

"He looked at her, aghast. _And you don't tell them off for that? Or tell the housekeeper?_

"_No, because I don't care. So Hiccup, _she sat at her bed cross-legged, eager to get business sorted. _Will you tell me where you've been to this time?_

"_Uh" | _

"_The truth Hiccup._

"Her intent gaze unnerved him. _I have" | I have been on an errand " _

"_No, _she reached and punched him in the arm. _The truth. We are friends, are we not?_

"_Friends? You didn't even want to speak to me a fortnight ago._

"_That was before I believed in dragons._

"That stopped Hiccup on his tracks.

"_Andâ€¦ youâ€¦ you believe in dragons now?_

"Astrid squirmed. _Well, if I can believe in ghosts, then I suppose I can believe in dragons. Besides, I have already seen one â€" your one â€" though very faintly. And I do not believe in anything until I have seen or experienced it myself. I have seen a dragon, and so I believe in its existence. _She finished in a stronger tone of voice.

"_Really? _Hiccup asked, not quite believing the speed by which _she_ believed in the magnificent beasts that he had been able to see since he could remember.

"_What can I say? I'm a Hofferson through and through, _she said proudly. _So: the truth, Hiccup._

"He watched for a sign that Astrid was taunting him, but her clear blue gaze dissipated his uncertainty. He sighed. _The truth is, Astrid â€" I've been flying to the surrounding areas to check on the dragons. _He closed his eyes and waited for her to punch him. But she did not even scoff. He opened an eye and found her looking expectantly at him.

"_Well? _She demanded. _Go on._

"_That's, er, pretty much it. _

"_Why were you checking up on the dragons? _

"_Well, you seeâ€¦ they've been getting sick, and the dragon trainers here don't know why. And so one of them wrote to my father asking for help._

"_Your father is a dragon trainer?_

"Hiccup suddenly blanched. _Uhhâ€¦ _he stammered. _You canâ€¦ you can say that, I guess._

"_Dragon trainers. _Astrid breathed. _Did you come from a family of dragon trainers?_

"_Youâ€¦ can say that as well._

"_Straight answers, Hiccup._

"â€¦ _yes. I came from a family of dragon trainers. _

"_Why were you gone so long this time?_

"_I had to go further. The illness, it seems, is spreading. Thankfully Toothless hasn't caught it yet, although I've noticed that he was flying rather drowsily this time around, but he's alright nowâ€¦ _Hiccup trailed off, then blinked and shook his head. _I'm

sorry, but I still can't believe that you believe me without me having to do anything. I thought I'd be throwing pebbles at your window all night long._

"Astrid laughed. _Well, believe it, because it's the truth. I saw a shadow, and I could not explain what it was. You offered an explanation, and so I have decided to take it. It's either that, or I'm going mad. _

"_You're not going mad, _Hiccup said firmly. _Though I may be._

"_What do you mean?_

"Hiccup shrugged. _You wouldn't believe me even if I told you._

"_Come on, Hiccup. You just made me believe in dragons._

"He paused, and then sighed. There was no way getting out of this one.

"_A few times in the past week, Iâ€| well, I thought I saw you around the grounds and in the house. But that's impossible, right? _He laughed nervously._ You have been away, travelling, this past week. Even I knew that at the time. How could it have been you?_

"_That wasn't me, _Astrid bit her lip. _And you're right, it isâ€| impossibleâ€| for me to be in two places at once. You mustâ€| you must have been dreaming._

"â€|_Yeah. _Hiccup looked down, unconvinced. But with no logical explanation to the phenomenon, he had no choice but to let it go.

"_But enough of that, let's go back to dragons, _Astrid poked him. _How does it feel like to fly? __Last I saw you, you were a green speck on the back of a black dot in the sky, flying higher than the clouds, so you were either levitating, or youâ€| what? _She demanded when Hiccup gave her a crooked grin.

"_Nothing, I'm justâ€| happy, I guess. And proud. Proud that you can see dragons without me having to convince you. Because it's a two way thing._

"_What is?_

"_Trust, and belief._

"Astrid thought in silence. _Why do I need trust to be able to see dragons?_

"_Because it's one side of the same coin. A human and a dragon will never be able to interact with each other unless there's trust and belief. Yes, the reason why many people cannot see dragons is because they do not believe in them. However, a person's belief in dragons will be nothing if the dragons do not sense them as well. _

"_Sense? I do not understand._

"_It's the closest English word to the dragon equivalent of human instinct. It is a mystery what they truly sense, but many believe that what they sense is destiny, for one can change one's fate, but one cannot stop destiny._

"_Iâ€| still do not understand._

"He nodded to her. _Here, give me your hand._

"Astrid held her hand out without hesitation, though she still could not help but blush when Hiccup sat down next to her to take it in between his warm hands. She thanked the heavens that her room was bathed in darkness.

"_It's just like a hand, _Hiccup was saying._ The back of your hand is different to the palm of your hand, yet they are stretched over the same skin, over the same bones, with the same blood running underneath. It's the same with dragons and humans. Dragons just live inâ€| a different side of the coin to us, so to speak. Same Earth, different worlds. A dragon will always be able to see humans, though humans are but ghosts to them. But if the dragons do not sense the human in return, the human will not be able to see them. Although they also said that there was a time when both worlds crossed, _he wrapped his hand over the back of hers, _and people and dragons saw and sensed each other as clear as day. _

"Astrid's hand twitched involuntarily.

"_Some humans are better at believing in dragons. Some, like me, are born with the ability and the knowledge to cross paths with the dragons. Outsiders â€" that is, people like yourself â€" may believe, but will have to wait until a dragon senses them. Some people wait forever._

"Astrid blinked. _And some dragons will wait forever for the human to believe?_

"Hiccup nodded. _This is the sadder of the two scenarios, for more often than not, the dragon will have struck a link with the human they had sensed â€" not quite as strong as a bond, but strong enough for the dragon to yearn after the human's affections and attentions for a long time, sometimes forever._

"_That is heartbreaking! _Astrid quietly exclaimed.

"_Yeah. Though there is one other way_, he said. _The dragons may be able to sense another human if a bonded human has strong ties with that other human. Then it's upto the bonded one to convince them to believe._

"Astrid thought his words through. If a bonded human has strong ties with another humanâ€|

"Realisation dawned on her.

"_That's what you were trying to do? _

"Hiccup ducked his head sheepishly.

"_You thought our friendship was a strong enough tie_.

"_Yeah, _he mumbled sadly, _you're the truest human friend I've ever had, believe it or not._

"Astrid's glanced at his hunched figure and immediately felt very bad for ignoring him. She reached out and gave him a one armed embrace, this time throwing all the etiquette she had ever learned to the wind.

"_And you're my friend too, _she whispered. _As long as you don't do anything stupid, you'll always be my friend. But Hiccup, we've only really been friends for several weeks, and for two weeks we were not even speaking to each other. How could our ties already be strong?_

"_But it wasn't strong! I mean, I don't know, _Hiccup shrugged. _As you've said: we weren't even been speaking to each other. And that's what boggles my mind. In fact, Toothless actually sensed you the moment I stepped foot in Warborough Hall, last month, even though he had never met you, and he was already bonded to me. He only sensed you, nobody else._

"Astrid remembered what she had overheard in the woods, the conversation between Toothless and Hiccup. _Most people never learn to see dragons, _he had said. _But y__ou sensed her before I even knew._

"_That's odd, _she murmured.

"_Yeah. _They glanced at each other, and jumped back when they found out how close their faces were. They both turned a bright shade of scarlet at the same time.

"_Well, umâ€¦| _

"_Alright then, erâ€¦|_

"_Guess that wasâ€¦| _

"_We should probablyâ€¦|_

"Astrid coughed into her fist. They looked at each other, then burst out laughing in their shared embarrassment. Astrid leaned back, searching for a pillow to stifle her giggles, but yelped when the mattress shifted under her, making her lose her balance. She fell over the edge and onto the carpet with a dull thud.

"_Oh my g- Astrid, are you okay? _

"Astrid was lying on the floor, her hair tousled all over her face, and she slapped both hands over her mouth as she continued to laugh. She suddenly snorted when she tried to take a breath, and she looked at Hiccup for a second with wide eyes, before they fell into fits of giggles again.

"_Beâ€¦| be quiet or your servants will hear us._

"_Can'tâ€¦| stopâ€¦|_

"_Ssh!_

"_I'll stop when you stop._

"_Don't challenge me, because I'll lose._

"_I can't breatheâ€¦| _

"Hiccup dropped a pillow on her face, which just made her laugh even more. She threw the pillow back at him with such force that he nearly fell off the bed too.

"They calmed down eventually, though laughter still spilled from their lips every now and then. Astrid hummed before she rolled up to sit on the floor, placing her arms on the bed and resting a cheek on the soft blanket. Hiccup lay down as well, his head resting on the same edge as Astrid's so that they were both looking straight at each other.

"_Trust and beliefâ€¦| _Astrid murmured. Hiccup saw her eyes shine in the darkness. _So I may believe, but I may never truly see one. I will only see glimpse and shadows in the corner of my eyes forevermore._

"_But Toothless senses you, _Hiccup repeated. _And you've already seen him._

"_Right, _she replied. She picked at the sleeves of her dress once more. _Hiccup, will you help me cross paths with more dragons? Will you help me form a bond with one? Train one?_

"Hiccup's heart beat faster at her request. _Sure, no problem, on one condition._

"_Yes?_

"_You will do everything I say: and I mean everything. When we are in the presence of dragons, when we are in their world, the protocols of this world do not apply. That means no 'your ladyship' or any of that. When I tell you to do something, you do it. When I tell you to not do something, you don't._

"Astrid narrowed her eyes dangerously, but Hiccup prevailed. _That is my price. _

"_Fine, _she hissed. _How long will I defer to my Lord Toothpick for?_

"_Forever._

"Astrid snorted. _One week._

"_Two years._

"_A week and a half._

"_One year, then. _

"_Two weeks!_

"_Deal's off. _He teased and made to get up.

"_Wait, wait! _Astrid snatched his shirt and yanked him back down to her level with surprising strength, and he fell back hard on the mattress. _How aboutâ€| how about until I bond with a dragon?_"

"Hiccup thought about it. He really did want Astrid to bond with a dragon of her own, but he also knew that two weeks was not going to be enough, let alone learn the basics of dragon training. _Alright, _he finally said, _You will have to defer to me until you bond with a dragon, plus five months for me to teach you how to train it. _He brought his hand forward. _Deal?_"

"_Deal! _She enthusiastically shook his hand, her grip so strong that Hiccup yelped in pain. He winced as he tried to massage the blood back into his fingertips.

"_You really don't know how strong you are, do you?_"

"_Oh, I do. You just don't know how weak you are._"

"_Trust me, I know._"

"Astrid sniggered, which gave way to a yawn as she hauled herself up to her bed. She drew the blanket around her and lay back on her pillows. _So when do we start?_"

"_Well, I'm going to be busy during the day with Gobber â€" I've been gone for too long, and the village needs a few things made and repaired. Your father is very generous to open his own personal smithy for the village's use._"

"_My father is a kind man, _Astrid murmured, and Hiccup noticed how sleepy she sounded. She must really be exhausted from travelling and having to put up with the tiresome people of her social circle. He got off the bed and tucked the blanket under her chin.

"_We'll start tomorrow night, _he promised her. She smiled before she closed her eyes to sleep, but then roused herself once more to watch him climb over the window sill.

"_Thank you Hiccup, _she whispered from across the room. _For trusting me_.

"He looked back at her and gave her one of his soft, genuine smiles.

"_Good night Astrid._"

"Hiccup swung a leg over the window sill and paused to look at Astrid one final time before he slipped out into the night.

"I watched him disappear from the darkness, the summer moon peeking in from beyond the horizon. A breeze drifted softly into the room as Astrid finally fell asleep in the embrace of the warm and gentle evening."

* * *

><p>I returned to my room later that day with Miss Hofferson's story

still lingering in my mind. Hiccup brought with him the sweetness and warmth of young summer, full of promise, and hope, and colourful friendship. It left me wondering how the people around the young Lady's life took to her blossoming friendship with the low-born blacksmith. But there was more.<p>

Trust and belief.

She had given me the keys to the other world, the other dimension, the other side of the coin. It was now up to me to figure out how I was going to use this information.

And there was more. Did Miss Hofferson think that I would not notice? Did she think that I was not listening closely? I was hanging on to every single word that she said. Was it simply a slip of the tongue?

Today, Miss Hofferson had said _I._

Once uttered, it resounded in my head and refused to be silenced.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

I originally planned on having the Christmas party scene in this chapter, but an entirely different inspiration bug bit, so I've had to push the Christmas party for later as I rearranged events into a new timeline, all so that it smoothly leads up to a certain Hiccstrid squeefest that will hopefully happen in 3-4 chapters.

Next chapter should be up in a few days (that is, if I don't get sidetracked with drawing again XD).

Sorry if the Hiccstrid is a little slow in coming. I want to establish Hiccup and Astrid's friendship first before we head to the romance because, as with any good relationship, friendship is what makes it strong. It's what makes it last, and so friendship must be at the centre of it all.

****LizzyLory:** **I actually don't know how long this is going to go for. Maybe 25? 30? 40? Sorry I really don't know _ haha Ruff will eventually interact with dragons, and it will happen when she least expects it, and it will shock her, and it will happen while she is in the company of others ;)

****Ferdoos**:** Thank you! :)

****PalindromePen**:** Aw thank you! 3 I ship both Rufflegs and Ruffgur, so I guess I am angling for both. The fun is in writing how Ruff reacts to a romantic advance and how she handles it :D

****Cat Eyed Blunder:** **You shall find out, in due time :)

****Loki Smokey**:** Thanks! Love the name :)

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which Astrid goes for spin!

10. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 9

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_Hold out your hands to feel the luxury of sunbeams. Press the soft blossoms against your cheek, and finger their graces of form, their delicate mutability of shape, their pliancy and freshness. Expose your face to the aerial floods that sweep the heavens, inhale great draughts of space, wonder, wonder at the wind's unwearied activity."_

â€" _Helen Keller, 1880 - 1968_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER NINE:

"True to his word, Hiccup stood below Astrid's window late the following evening and threw pebbles at the glass. He had not seen her all day, which was rather odd. And she did not immediately climb down in a bundle of excitement, which was also odd. Still, he waited, and he was just wondering if she had forgotten about their arrangement and had drifted off to sleep when her window finally opened and she cautiously peeked out.

"_Hiccup?_"

"_Down here._"

"_Alright, I'm climbing down. Don't you dare look up my dress._"

"_Of course I won't! _Hiccup hissed, affronted that she thought him so un-gentlemanly as to look up a lady's skirt. He puffed his cheeks out and stared in the direction of the woods while she climbed down quickly.

"Astrid jumped the last couple of metres and landed next to Hiccup with practiced ease. Hiccup was relieved to see her wearing something more decent than a nightgown this time, though he wished he had the foresight to have told her to wear something warmer. She had a thoughtful, distracted look on her face, and he could not help but wonder why.

"_What took you? _He asked as they walked in the direction of the park.

"_I didn't take that long!_"

"_Yes you did._"

"_Wellâ€¦ I was delayed._"

"_By what?_"

"_Never you mind, _she snipped. She seemed to be in a bad mood, so Hiccup decided to let it go.

"_You know, I'm a little hurt that you didn't visit me this morning,

_he said, trying to lighten her mood. If he was going to introduce her to Toothless again she was going to have to be in a calm state of mind. _Even your governess paid me a visit. _

"_Miss Sawyer? _She exclaimed, surprised. _What did she want?_"

"_She wanted me to keep away from you._"

"Astrid laughed with derision. _I see._"

"_She said that I was a bad influence on you._"

"_Hmm..._"

"_Wait, you're not going to explode into a fit of rage on my behalf?_"

"_No._"

"_Wow, some friend._"

"Astrid chuckled as she punched him in the shoulder. _You silly boy. You __**are**__ a bad influence on me. _"

"_How am I a bad influence?_"

"_Well, let's see, _she quirked an eyebrow at him. _In the past, I was content to follow the rules, because that's what's expected of me, that's how things always are. I was even somewhat resigned to the fate that every lord's daughter is cursed with, though I may have the upper hand than most, as my father equipped me with skills that only gentlemen are allowed to possess, thus making me somewhat their equal. But now I am starting to question things, and everyone knows how dangerous a woman is when she starts to actually think for herself._"

"_So sarcastic, _Hiccup remarked.

"_I believe I have you to thank for that._"

"_Erâ€¦ you're welcome?_"

"She punched him again.

"_And the punching?_"

"_Oh no, that's all me._"

"_So ladylike._"

"_You have no idea._"

"The further they walked from the house, the calmer Astrid appeared to get. By the time they arrived at the edge of the park, the pair was back to their old selves, laughing and teasing each other. Astrid was about to walk further when Hiccup grabbed her hand.

"_We're not going there._"

"_Why? _It was then when Astrid realised what he had not brought with

him. _You did not bring a lamp? _She exclaimed. _Why were you not prepared?_

"_Because I have Toothless, _he replied matter-of-factly. _Why would you need a lamp when you already have a lamp of a dragon right next to you._

"_Except we don't have a lamp of a dragon right next to us._

"_Astrid, right next to you._

"Astrid froze, and it was then when she finally noticed a presence. There was a dry snort behind her which blew hair into her face. She slowly turned around and was met with a pair of green, cat-like eyes glowing in the dark.

"_Hiccup?_

"_Ssh, it's okay. _He moved to stand next to her, completely relaxed. _Toothless, meet Astrid. Astrid, meet Toothless. He's a Night Fury: The unholy offspring of lightning and death itse -_

"_That's not helping! _Astrid hissed.

"_Just relax, he can sense your fear._

"Astrid straightened her shoulders. _I am not afraid, _she said loudly, though her eyes said otherwise. She could only see those narrow green eyes, unblinking, fixed intently on her. Where was the rest of the dragon?

"_Toothless, come out of the woods buddy. We can't see very well in the dark._

"The creature emitted a low growl from deep within its throat, the vibration rattling Astrid to her bones. And then the eyes moved.

"Sleek, black, cautious, cat-like. More solid than the shadow she had seen two weeks ago. It slunk around the pair and sat on its haunches, its eyes still trained on Astrid.

"It was real. It was right in front of her. Dragons were _real_.

"Hiccup was smiling widely as he stepped forward, and only then did the black dragon look away from Astrid. It crooned as the boy threw his arms around its short neck, murmuring words of praise. Hiccup looked back at Astrid, who stood rooted to the spot.

"_Well?_

"_Well what?_

"_Well what do you think?_

"_My mind is still trying to comprehend what I am seeing._

"Hiccup rolled his eyes. _Give me your hand._

"_Why? So that you can feed it to him?_"

"_No! Just give me â€" oh for the love of Pete. _Without much ceremony, Hiccup took her hand and slowly held it up to the dragon, palm first. _Remember our deal_, he hissed through the side of mouth.

"Toothless sniffed her hand and turned his head to one side to examine it, and for one heartbeat Hiccup thought that he was going to reject her. But Toothless' hesitation passed, and he pressed his snout against her palm.

"Astrid choked back her delight as she rubbed the dry, rough skin. The dragon seemed to be purring, the ear plates around its head quivering. She remembered that her father's hunting dogs loved being scratched behind the ears, and so stepped closer and moved her hand to the back of his head to scratch a spot.

"Toothless' eyes rolled to the back of his head, his mouth parting to reveal a gummy grin, and he leaned into Astrid's hand. She bit her lip and smiled back at Hiccup, who was just about to burst with happiness at the sight of his closest human friend and his closest dragon friend interacting with each other.

"_Scratch him under the chin, _he suggested.

"_Why?_"

"_Do it, he ceases being a dragon when his chin gets scratched._

"Astrid did as he asked, and Toothless froze for a second before he collapsed in a boneless heap. He puffed out a contented sigh, blowing dust in Hiccup's direction. Astrid giggled.

"_So what do you think now Astrid?_"

"_I think it's amazing. _Astrid crouched down and patted Toothless' head fondly. _He's amazing._

"_That he is, _Hiccup walked over to them, _Hey, fancy a flight? _Toothless was immediately on his feet at the mention of 'flight', his tail swinging wildly, his tongue lolling out. And it was only then that Astrid noticed a saddle of sorts on the back of the black dragon. Hiccup swung a leg over Toothless and offered her a hand.

"_Coming?_"

"_Erâ€" _Astrid hesitated. _Is it safe?_"

"Hiccup rolled his eyes. _Of course it's safe. Come on._

"Astrid stared at the dragon.

"Trust and belief.

"She hesitate for a secondâ€" |

"_Alright. _Astrid pushed his hand away and got on the saddle by herself. However, once seated, she did not quite know where to put her hands, and she was definitely not going to hold on to Hiccup like some pansy.

"_Hold on, _Hiccup called over his shoulder. Toothless crouched, his rump wriggling in anticipation.

"_Hold on to whaaaaat! _Astrid shrieked as the dragon suddenly launched itself into a nearly vertical flight. She clutched fistfuls of Hiccup's shirt until she had her arms secured around him. It was like galloping upwards on an over-eager horse, and she had absolutely no control over it. The dragon twisted and twirled mid-air, rising and diving as Toothless tried to catch a draught in the windless night. She gripped Hiccup tighter and screamed in terror, squeezing her eyes shut to avoid having to look down at the quickly retreating earth.

"Finally, they broke through the clouds and out into a sea of stars. As Toothless levelled out, Astrid slowly opened one eye and gasped as the constellations around her filled her eyes. She looked down and saw the curve of the world, the lights at the village, her house - all of the world's glory, before a cloud obscured it all from view.

"A movement in the vast skies caught her eye, and she gasped when she saw a pair of dragons flying in the distance.

"_Can't breathe, _Hiccup wheezed.

"It took a moment for Astrid to realise that Hiccup had spoken. _What?_

"_Armâ€| neckâ€| can't breatheâ€|_

"_Oh! _Astrid quickly unwrapped her arm from his neck and moved her hands to grip his shoulders instead. Hiccup gasped in air and massaged his throat.

"_You definitely don't know your own strength, _he rasped, and Astrid smirked.

"They flew around for what felt like hours, the dragon dipping through clouds and doing loops in the air. But, too soon, she felt Hiccup's foot twist forward on his stirrup. Toothless responded by banking left, back to Warborough Hall. Astrid wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her chin upon his shoulders, her blue eyes reflecting the thousands of galaxies in the night sky.

"_Hiccup? _

"_Hmm?_

"_I have a question. If there was somebody â€" an outsider â€" looking up at the sky right now, will they see us?_

"Hiccup shrugged. _People see what they want to see. If they do not want to see dragons, then they do not see them. They do not see us._

"Astrid hummed, and they flew in silence for a while.

"_Where are we now Hiccup? _She finally breathed in his ear._ Are we in their world or ours?_"

"She felt him shrug. _Neither, and both._"

"_We are in between?_"

"_We are in between._"

"Toothless circled the estate once before landing beside the lake. The pair dismounted, and the dragon immediately dipped its head in the water to drink.

"Astrid brushed her fringe away from her eyes as she watched Toothless. _I can't wait to bond with my own dragon, _she murmured.

"_I can't wait to see what dragon you'll bond with, _was Hiccup's reply.

"_How many types of dragons are there?_"

"_There aren't really that many here: you encounter more dragons the further up north you go. But yeah, there are many types of dragons, though there used to be more. Dragons are unfortunately dying out, there are fewer eggs being laid each year, and fewer still that hatch._"

"_Why?_"

"_We don't know. It's terrible, _he gritted his teeth in anger. _We've been trying to figure out why for centuries, and now even grown dragons are dying! _He paused when he realised that he had been shouting. _Forgive me, I did not mean to shout._"

"Astrid tucked her hair behind an ear and shrugged. _I understand why you are upset. But I'll help you. I'll help all of you if I could: Just let me know what I can do, and I'll do it._"

"Hiccup raised an eyebrow, but Astrid was determined.

"_I'm serious Hiccup. _"

"_Truly m'lady?_"

"_Yes, truly, _Astrid hissed at him before she deviously grinned. Without warning, Astrid pushed him hard, and he yelped as he fell into the lake. Hiccup sputtered to the surface, the rippling water echoing loudly in the silence of the night.

"Toothless gave them both a wry look before he trotted away.

"_Useless reptile! _Hiccup hissed through chattering teeth.

"When Astrid was safely back in her bedroom, the exhilaration of flight was still rushing through her body. She could not sleep, she

could not even lie still. She could still feel the adrenaline of flight and the wind in her hair. She could still see the endless sapphire dome above her and hear Toothless' powerful wing beats.

"She could still feel Hiccup's heartbeat beneath her hands.

"She kicked herself out of her bed and sat down in front of her writing desk. She began to write, and once she started she could not stem the tide of words that poured from her pen. She wrote and wrote, and wrote all night until she heard the servants moving about.

"She wrote until there was nothing left to write, and only then did she fall asleep."

* * *

><p>"A few days later, as Astrid was doing her embroidery by a window in the drawing room, she caught a movement in the corner of her eye. She looked outside and saw Toothless land right in front of the pavilion in the garden. She saw Hiccup dismount and scan the windows and, once he spotted her, gestured her to meet him outside.<p>

"Astrid shot up from her seat, and her governess looked up at her from her book.

"_Iâ€| Oh, the sun has finally come out. I think I shall take a turn about the gardens and enjoy the sunshine while I still can._

"_I will walk with you, _Miss Sawyer said, putting her book down, but Astrid shook her head.

"_That is very kind of you, Miss Sawyer, thank you. But I shall walk alone. _She strode quickly to the door. _I will not be long, I just need some fresh air._

"Her governess sat back down with a disapproving look. _Please take care, Astrid. That boy is trouble._

"_Who is?_

"_You know who._

"_What nonsense, _Astrid said cheerfully. She grabbed her hat and nearly ran outside where she found the boy in question waiting for her at the pavilion.

"_Where's Toothless? Are we flying again? _She asked, but drew back when she saw the solemn look on his face. _Hiccup, what's wrong?_

"_Toothless and I were flying this morning, and we found an injured Nadder. Just at the coast, but it's not far as the dragon flies. I need help, but unfortunately Gobber needs to stay at the smithy, and you said you wanted to help, so I thought that m-_

"_Wait, wait, Hiccup, please slow down. _

"_Are you free? Can you come with me right now?_

"Astrid looked back towards the house, and wondered if the governess was spying from one of the windows.

"_Iâ€™ suppose. But why do you need me, you've managed to rescue dragons without me thus far._

"Hiccup sighed. _Becauseâ€™ because the Nadder will not let me go near her. And I've read that, sometimes, female Nadders are prickly with the company they choose to surround themselves with. And I thought that maybeâ€™ maybe a female presence would calm her down._

"_Oh, _Astrid squared her shoulders. _Well in that case, let's go. I'm sure I will find some excuse as to why it took me hours to walk around the gardens._

"Hiccup smiled gratefully at her. _Thank you. _He began to jog away from her._ I'm going to get some supplies. Put on something warm and meet me by the woods in fifteen minutes."_

* * *

><p>"They flew east, towards the sea, covering vast distances in such a short amount of time that Astrid did not think she would be able to endure a carriage, train, or other means of modern transport ever again. Soon Toothless fluttered heavily to an isolated and rocky beach.<p>

"Astrid jumped off before Hiccup had unstrapped the safety harness from Toothless. She reached a hand up to her head to readjust her hat, but was dismayed to find that it had fallen off sometime during flight.

"She would have to explain how she lost that one too.

"_Over here, _Hiccup said as he slung a bag over one shoulder. He led her in the direction of the cliffs, the sea-tossed wind tangling her hair out of her braids. She took a lock of hair out of her mouth, and froze when she heard a pitiful squawk. She looked up and spotted it.

"The dragon.

"Terrifying and beautiful. Majestic yet sorrowful. She imagined the scales would have been bright blue in health, though right now it was as grey as the pebbles around it.

"It lifted its head and fixed them a haughty stare, its pupils a narrow slit against a sea of yellow. Hiccup set down his bag and cautiously approached her, palm held up, but the spikes around the dragon's head suddenly rose like the hackles of a frightened dog.

"It was such a pitiful sight, Astrid felt her heart breaking in two.

"_Ssh, it's okay girl, _Hiccup was saying, _I'm a friend â€™ we're friends. We are not going to hurt you._

"She squawked at the boy harshly, the loud sound making both Hiccup and Astrid jump. She cocked her head and settled her eyes on Astrid, and suddenly her pupils widened.

"Hiccup held his breath. He knew what that look meant.

"Could the dragon already beâ€¦?"

"_Astridâ€¦_ he murmured. _Do you trust me?_"

"_Of course._"

"_I need you to go to her, but slowly._"

"Astrid whipped her head to him. _What?_"

"_Go. To. Her. Slowly._"

"She blanched. _But she's a wild dragon. Areâ€¦_ are you sure?_"

"_Yes. Remember our agreement: you do as I say._"

"_Hiccupâ€¦_"

"_You'll be safe. I promise._"

"Astrid's wide eyes were fearful, but she steeled herself and nodded. Cautiously, she walked towards the skittish beast, one step at a time. She murmured assurances and praise, told her how beautiful she was, how Astrid would brush her scales down to shiny perfection if she would just allow them to touch her. She did not know half of the things that she was saying, did not know that Nadders loved being praised, vain creatures that they were. All she knew was that she had to keep talking to her, calm her down, get her to trust them.

"The Nadder suddenly stood up and drunkenly peered down at the girl.

"_Erâ€¦_ Hiccup?_"

"_Stand still, don't make any sudden movements._"

"The dragon bent and sniffed around Astrid before she snuffled her hair. Astrid stood stock still, waiting for the dragon to finish whatever it was doing. The Nadder then crooned and started to butt her head against Astrid, forcing the young girl to step back to maintain her balance.

"_Well, that was fast, _Hiccup chuckled.

"_What is? _Astrid muttered, still frozen on the spot. The Nadder had started nipping at her hair once more.

"_She seems to like you, _Hiccup laughed. _More specifically: she seems to be rather fond of your hair._"

"_My â€" my hair? _Astrid suddenly staggered at the weight of the dragon's head when it started to rub its face on her head. _What do

you mean m-my hair?_

"_Aw, look Toothless, she's grooming her._

"_Hiccup, _Astrid hissed dangerously. _If you're laughing at me I swear â€" _

"_Not laughing! Not laughing! _Hiccup said quickly. _Butâ€| not helping either._

"_Hiccup!_

"_Not yet, anyway. Let me just enjoy this for a while longer._

"The Nadder nudged Astrid's arm with her head and looked at her expectantly, a croon rumbling in her throat. Astrid's breath hitched and, remembering how Toothless accepted her, brought her hand up to the dragon's nose. The Nadder sniffed it, then gently pushed its beak against Astrid's hand.

"_She's saying hello, _Hiccup murmured. Astrid looked behind her and grinned excitedly at Hiccup before she turned her attention back at the dragon.

"_Why hello to you too! _She said as she rubbed her palms under the scaly head. She, however, forgot what Hiccup had said about dragons and chins, for the next moment the Nadder had melted at her feet in a contented puddle of blue. The dragon trilled happily, the spikes quivering with the sound. Astrid laughed and wrapped her arms around the large head, apologising softly.

"Hiccup smiled at the scene, and then blinked when he felt a strangeâ€| tug in his chest, as if his heart was bursting and falling from a cliff at the same time. Confused, he shook his head and looked at the Night Fury sitting next to him. He found the dragon giving him a sly lookâ€|

"As if the black reptile knew something he did not.

"_Wh- what are you looking at? _Hiccup barked. Toothless growled and rolled his eyes. _You know, I sometimes question whether you're even a dragon or â€" ow!_

"Astrid and the Nadder turned at the sound of Toothless' tailfin smacking Hiccup around the head. The Nadder stood shakily on her feet and cocked her head to one side.

"_Don't worry, girl, _Astrid whispered. _That's how they say they care for each other."_

"Hiccup rolled his eyes and approached the Nadder, and this time the dragon did not move away, though its tail spikes lifted slightly when he touched her. Astrid kept rubbing her head and whispered soothing words to her, keeping her mind away from the boy who steadily examined her body for injuries.

"Hiccup finally stepped away after a few minutes.

"_Besides a few cuts and bruises, I can't find anything that may have injured her enough to crash land, _he said, reaching inside his

satchel and taking out a piece of roast chicken. Astrid raised an eyebrow at him. _What? _The boy exclaimed defensively. _Nadders like chicken!_

"_Not that. How come you cannot find anything that may have injured her? She has a broken wing!_

"_Caused by the way she landed against the cliff face, _Hiccup explained. _I think that the reason why she fell was from exhaustion, though I'm not sure how she could have been exhausted. Nadders are coastal dragonsâ€¦ could she have been fleeing from somethingâ€¦? _He trailed off, lost in thought.

"_Well, whatever happened we cannot leave her here alone, at the mercy of the elements and who knows what else._

"_I know, _Hiccup walked over to Toothless and produced another harness of sorts from one of the bags. _Which is why I brought this. We'll need to fly her back to your house._

"Both dragons perked up at the comment, and both growled in protest at the same time. Astrid and Hiccup jumped up and murmured assurances to them, promising both with abundant treats when they got back to the estate. The dragons were finally persuaded enough to calm down, though that did not stop them from loudly grumbling at each other.

"_I bet the Nadder is saying she's too dignified to be carried around, _Hiccup grinned, wiping his forehead as he carefully strapped the harness around the Nadder's body.

"_And I bet Toothless is saying that he is no pack horse, _Astrid replied as she checked the belts for tightness.

"The black dragon harrumphed in confirmation.

"Once the Nadder was secured, they flew back to Warborough Hall with Toothless clutching the harness between his claws. Hiccup and Astrid argued the entire journey, as they could not agree on where the injured dragon should stay. Astrid had wanted to keep her at the stables, but Hiccup argued the horses would sense the dragon and be spooked. He wanted to keep her at the garden shed, but Astrid argued that, since Toothless already slept there, it would be far too crowded at night.

"In the end, they both decided to shelter the dragon in the only place they knew was safe."

* * *

><p>"Oh, no no no no! Gobber yelled in the boy's face. _That dragon is not staying at the forge. It's already crowded as it is._

"_But where do you propose I put her?_

"_I don't know. Somewhere other than the forge._

"_There __**is __no somewhere else, Gobber. _

"_Then outside! _

"_But -_

"_The answer's no, Hiccup, and that's final. _

"_Final? You are not my master!_

"Gobber dropped his hammer and glared at Hiccup, and the blacksmith's apprentice cowered for a second before he jutted out a stubborn chin. The one-legged giant loomed over him. _Are you really going to play that card on me, lad? _He hissed dangerously.

"_Y-yes._

"_Really? And mind you think hard on your answer._

"Hiccup glowered, and then lowered his eyes. _No sir._

"Astrid listened to this entire exchange outside the forge, and sighed when she realised that she would have to interfere. She brushed down her dress and casually walked into the smithy.

"_Good afternoon Gobber, _she said sweetly.

"_Miss Hofferson! _The giant beamed down at her. _How may we be of service? _

"She smiled back. _I was standing outside and could not help but overhear your conversationâ€|_

"_Astrid, he knows. _Hiccup hissed.

"_I'm sorry?_

"_He knows. He knows that you can interact with dragons now._

"Astrid blinked, and then scowled at Hiccup. _You could have told me that earlier!_

"_Miss Hofferson, _Gobber rubbed the back of his neck. _With all due respect, that dragon cannot stay in here._

"_And where do you propose we keep her? _Astrid demanded.

"_Already asked that, _Hiccup muttered.

"_Someplace else, _was Gobber's reply.

"_And where is that someplace else?_

"_Iâ€| well, outside._

"_No, she must be kept inside! _She paused as an idea hit her. _I have it! What about one of our spare rooms?_

"_No! _Hiccup and Gobber exclaimed at the same time.

"_Hiccup, _she rolled her eyes, _I thought the dragons exist in a

different world... Other side of the coin, right? Why should it matter if the dragon stays inside the house when the servants will not see her anyway?_

"_Because the laws of this world still exist, _Hiccup hissed. _If the dragon breaks a vase, or tears a carpet apart, or fires a hole through the wall " Astrid, I don't think you'll be able to explain how these 'accidents' came about to your father._

"Astrid smiled. _Is that a challenge?_

"_No, Astrid, it's not a challenge._

"_The Nadder will stay in the house, _she said firmly. _And that's final._

"_You're not our mistress, _Hiccup said hotly.

"_Er, actually, she is, _Gobber whispered. _And what she's suggesting is not a bad idea, if you think about it._

"_Gobber! _Hiccup cried.

"_So it's settled then! _Astrid said cheerfully.

"_How can you take her side? _Hiccup angrily cried, but Gobber simply clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder, causing him to stumble.

"_As I've said: It's not a bad idea."_

* * *

><p>"The pair nursed the blue Nadder back to health in a spare bedroom that was most stripped bare of furniture and fixings. Hiccup would visit whenever he could, usually at night when he would be able to sneak in through Astrid's window. He would teach her what Nadders liked best, and what dragons hated in general. He taught her what to do in the event of a hostile or sick dragon, and told her that dragons touched each other's noses as a form of greeting.<p>

"She was often seen with that blacksmith's apprentice, and her governess did not at all approve that her charge was still spending a lot of time with the boy, and she was disappointed that her employer did not seem to care at all! In fact, she felt that Lord Hofferson _approved _it. It was odd, very odd.

"It was also odd to see Astrid loitering out in the sun with weapon in hand, or in the drawing room doing her embroidery, but then hear echoes of her voice whispering on the other side of the house. The housemaids soon took to walking the corridors in pairs or more, as if the presence of others would be enough to dissipate the ghostly whisperings in the house.

"On the third week, as the leaves were starting to turn, the air beginning to crisp, and Astrid's sixteenth birthday drew nearer, the pair decided that the Nadder was healthy enough to be let outside. In the dead of the night, Astrid led the Nadder outside where Hiccup stood waiting, stamping his boot on the ground to keep warm as Toothless sat next to him.

"_What took you? _Hiccup hissed.

"_We had to walk slowly to keep her from knocking things over, _Astrid whispered. The dragon behind her squawked loudly, and Astrid jumped, afraid that the household would wake.

"_Don't worry, _Hiccup said, _they can't hear her. Come on, let's move to the lake where nobody can hear us__**.**_

"Astrid nodded, and began to lead the Nadder past the gardens and to more open space. Once there, the dragon shook her head and spread her wings, and then she started running. She flapped her wings desperately, and managed to lift up for a few seconds before dropping back down to the ground.

"_Oh no! _Astrid put a hand to her mouth.

"_No, no, this is good! _Hiccup moved next to her. _She's making progress. Her wings are still too weak, but at least they are no longer broken. But she'll fly again, don't worry. She just needs more time._

"Astrid wrinkled her brows. _Are you sure?_

"_Absolutely, _he reassured her. She smiled at him, and he blushed. _Er, Astridâ€¦ may I ask you something?_

"_Of course._

"_About your birthday, I -_

"_Not looking forward to it, _Astrid interrupted, gritting her teeth and looking away.

"_What?_

"Astrid put her hands on her hips and blew a stray strand of hair away from her eyes. _My father is planning a ball._

"_Oh. And that's bad?_

"_That's very bad. I know what my father is doing. _She started pacing back and forth. _I will be presented to society in two years, so why not start early right? _She scoffed. _Why not start parading me in front of other families as if I was someâ€¦ some prized horse for them to bid on? _

"_I don't think that's what your father is trying to do, _Hiccup said, but Astrid did not hear him.

"_Then maybe, in two years' time, when I come of age, I will find one out of the dozens of sons they are trying to push my way tolerable enough to spend my whole life with._

"_Wellâ€¦ maybeâ€¦ maybe you will find one of these sons tolerable enough. Maybe - maybe you've already met him._

"_Hiccup, please, _she said drily. _And even if I have already met him, then what? Will I just allow him to whisk me away into the sunset, and expect us both to live happily ever after? Do you expect

me to live the rest of my life stuck in domesticity, knowing what I know now? Knowing that there is a whole different world beyond this one? Knowing that I have bonded with a dragon, and that I can now fly up to the skies and touch the clouds and just beâ€¦ just be... _She sighed._ I just want to be free!_ She spread her arms and let her head fall back.

"Hiccup suddenly found that he could not keep his eyes away from her. _You do not know what the future holds, _he whispered.

"_Hiccupâ€¦ my father has been conspiring with the families and their sons ever since I was born, _Astrid gritted her teeth. _Trying toâ€¦ to sell my good character, and good family name, and good wealth, and good breeding. _Astrid spat the words out with as much venom as she could muster. _And I don't understand why he's doing this._

"_Your father is just trying to make sure you have a good life after you are married._

"_I know Hiccup, I know. What I don't understand is why he is putting me forward as if I was some prize to be won, some stag to be hunted, some jewel to be possessed. I don't want to be somebody's prize! I don't want to be loved by somebody who I do not like, or to be loved by somebody because I am a Hofferson, because I am my father's daughter, and I do not want to be married to somebody who I do not love!_

"_You don't have to, though! _Hiccup exclaimed. _You do realise that the days of arranged marriages are long gone._

"_Of course I know that! _Astrid snapped. _I know they cannot force me into marriage. I know that I can live the life of an old maid if I wanted to. But if my father suggests a husband to me, or even hint at a union between two familiesâ€¦ Iâ€¦ Iâ€¦ _She groaned up to the heavens in frustration. _Do you not see Hiccup? I love my father too much to go against his wishes. My familial duty runs too deep._

"Hiccup blinked.

"Astrid sighed and sat down on the damp grass, hugging her knees to her chest as she watched the Nadder give up on flying and slide into the lake instead. Toothless stretched his neck out to the water and warbled an encouragement to the other dragon. The Nadder responded with a yellow-eyed glare.

"_It is not fair, _Astrid mumbled. _She is free live an unrestrained life, to choose her own fate, yet I am stuck with mine._

"Hiccup crouched down next to her. _She's a Nadder, a wild thing. You cannot compare her life to yours._

"Astrid pressed her lips together in a straight line. After her initial outburst, she was suddenly fearful of the words that threatened to tumble from her mouth, fearful of what she was in danger of saying next.

"Fortunately, Hiccup decided to change the subject.

"_I have something that might cheer you up. _He stood up. _Come with

me to the forge?_

"Astrid looked up at him, and she was suddenly very grateful for his company, for allowing her to rant and get angry, and for being her anchor, for reminding her why her father was doing these things. She pushed herself off the grass and smiled faintly at him and, leaving the two dragons by the lake, they made their way across the grounds towards the dark forge. Once there, Hiccup handed her a piece of cloth and asked her to cover her eyes with it as he lit a few candles around the forge.

"_Are you serious? _Astrid held the cloth between her fingers and gave him an incredulous look.

"_Just put it on, will you? I have a present for you._

"She gripped the cloth as a faint blush spread across her cheeks. _Present?_

"_For your upcoming birthday. I thought I'd give it to you now, considering you were so glum and angry before._

"_Why do I need to be blindfolded?_

"_Because! It's a surprise, so justâ€¦| augh! Just put it on Astrid!_

"She sucked in a breath. _Fine, _she hissed. She quickly tied it around her eyes and crossed her arms.

"_So stubborn, _Hiccup grumbled as he uncrossed her arms and led her somewhere by the elbow.

"_I heard that!_

"_You were meant to. Okay, wait, stop here. Give me your hand._

"Astrid reached out blindly, and she felt his warm hands clasp it and slowly lead it down to something on the table. Something cool to the touch, and leathery, and curved and familiar andâ€¦|

"_You can take off your blindfold now._

"Astrid did, and her breath caught at the beautiful thing in front of her.

"_A saddle? _She breathed. And it wasn't just any saddle. _Youâ€¦| you made my Nadder a saddle?_

"_Happy birthday, _he grinned. _Do you like it?_

"She ran her fingers over the saddle, over the braided leather along the edges. The elegance in its simplicity. The power that it represented and the freedom of flight that it promised. She looked back at the boy and, before she could think twice, she threw her arms around him and embraced him tightly. It was not an awkward squeeze, or a delicate one-armed hug. She embraced him warmly, with all her heart and with all her soul.

"Hiccup rigidly patted her back, and she knew that he was blushing.
Iâ€¦ uhâ€¦ I take that you like it.

"_I love it Hiccup. _She pulled away. _Thank you. For everything. How can I ever repay you?_

"_It's a gift, you do not owe me anything._

"_It's not just the saddle Hiccup. You trusted me with your secret, showed me the joys of flight, taught me the basics of dragon trainingâ€¦|_

"_And in return you have been a kind employer to Gobber and me. Ow! _He chuckled as he rubbed a spot in his shoulder where she had punched him.

"_I'm serious, _she growled.

"_Don't worry about it. It's what friends doâ€¦| at least I think that's what friends do._

"_Wellâ€¦| let me know if there's anything at all I can do for you. It will be poor of me if all I can give you in return is friendship. Perhapsâ€¦| something for your blacksmithing career? If you ever need a good word put in my father and I will be more than happy to do so.
_

"Hiccup's smile faded and he turned away from her. Confused, Astrid bent to look up at his face.

"_Hiccup, what's wrong?_

"He smiled sadly. _I... it's nothing. _

"_No, tell me. Please?_

"He looked at her and held her gaze. Blue on green and green on blue, like the meeting of sky and earth on a clear day. And though he yearned to finally unburden his heart to her, he knew that now was not the time.

"_I was just reminded that my time here is numbered, _he mumbled instead._ Gobber and I will eventually have to leave, go back northâ€¦| I don't know when we'll see each other again, if ever._

"Astrid sighed. _I know._

"_Which is why your friendship is the only thing that I ask of you, while I am here. Your friendship, and that you will remember me kindly. These are more than enough. I will make a hundred saddles if it means that we can be friends._

"_And I will always be your friend. But if there's anything at all that I can do for you, you will let me know, right?_

"Hiccup looked at her. He felt warmer at her hopeful smile, felt his heart thrum at the way her eyes glittered in the candlelight. He wanted to remember this forever, to remember her like this. To remember her looking kindly at him, oblivious to who he really was.

He wanted to finally tell her the truth, but he was afraid that she might run away. He wanted to take her in his arms, but knew that he could not. He wanted to stay in Warborough Hall for longer, and knew that he must not.

"He was in danger of falling in love with her.

"_Hiccup?_"

"He held her gaze for a while longer before he squeezed her hand. _I promise I will let you know."_"

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

I think I should note right here that Toothless' tailfin is not missing at this point in time.

Secondly, I was re-reading the Word document with the plot and half-baked chapters and other ideas for this fic and I just realised that I never mentioned the story arcs! So just a quick note that this fic will be told in four arcs. This first arc deals with destiny, and there's only one more chapter before it's complete! Hooray! A milestone will be reached!

****Ferdoos:** ****Thanks :) hope you enjoyed this one too!**

****LizzyLory**:** Thanks! Shouldn't be long now actually. My estimate is a few more chapters until she finally properly interacts with a dragon.

****RedLavender08**:** Oh, so that's how people without FF accounts follow fics! I've always wondered XD You should definitely get an account! :)

****hpnarutardsjedipirate1234**:** Thanks. You will find out what Fishlegs found out very, _very _soon ;)

****Cat Eyed Blunder**:** Yeah me too. Me too :(Thanks for your review!

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which Ruffnut is handed a very important letter.

11. Arc 1: Destiny - Chapter 10

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart."_"

â€" _Marcus Aurelius, 121 AD â€" 180 AD_"

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TEN:

"Astrid proved herself to be a good student to Hiccup. She was a fast learner, she was attentive to the Nadder's every need, and soon the dragon's fondness for her turned to something steadfast, something strong.

"Hiccup likewise proved to be a not-so-lenient teacher that Astrid originally thought he would be. He sometimes even forewent gentlemanliness in favour of strictness, which, in turn, worked rather well with Astrid's focused personality.

"The Nadder learned to fly again very quickly, and so Astrid trained with her dragon nearly every day over the next month. It was true that there were times when her Nadder would be gone for long periods of time, but Astrid did not mind these absences, for she knew that the dragon merely wanted to be in solitude for a while. She knew that she would always come back, and the dragon always did, more affectionate than ever. It was a brilliant, golden time in Astrid's life, and she wished that it would last forever. But such things were never meant to last, and the shimmer soon started to fade along with the turning of the leaves."

* * *

><p>"A few weeks before the ball, I decided to sneak out and look for the beautiful Nadder. I wanted to spend some more time with her, for I knew that I would not get the chance again once the families started to pour in.<p>

"I found her sleeping in the woods, her scales shining bright and sapphire underneath the dappled sunshine of the autumn canopies above. For one long moment I simply stood there and looked at her, almost in awe, and felt proud at how healthy and beautiful she looked. I stepped forward, but the sound of the leaves crunching underneath my feet startled her awake. She was up in her feet in a flash, tail pointed rigidly skywards, spikes raised up.

"I nearly stumbled back in alarm at this very hostile reception. I put my hands up in a peaceful gesture as I slowly walked towards her once more. _Hi girl, _I said in a soothing, low voice. _It's me! It's Astrid " do you not recognise me?_

"She lowered her spikes at the sound of my voice, but her pupils were still narrowed to slits. She stalked around me, sniffing my hair. She suddenly crouched and gave a low squawk.

"_What's wrong? _I asked, testing her, for I already knew why she was acting like so. The confusion in her eyes was evident, even to me.

"The tension in the air was so thick that I nearly jumped out of my skin when Hiccup spoke from behind me.

"_You know that you shouldn't approach a sleeping Nadder. I thought I told you that before?_

"I glared at him. _And you shouldn't approach me from behind: I thought I had already made that clear?_

"He subconsciously rubbed the shoulder where I punched him the last

time he surprised me. I smirked in satisfaction before turning back to the hostile Nadder.

"_What's wrong with her Hiccup?_"

"_I'm not sure, _Hiccup approached her, and the Nadder comfortably let him pet her beak, though she was still looking warily at me. _It's almost as ifâ€|_"

"â€| _as if she doesn't recognise me, _ I finished for him.

"Hiccup frowned, imagining how Astrid's heart must be breaking: the Nadder had bonded with her â€" Hiccup was sure of that. So for the Nadder to suddenly not recognise her was incredibly puzzling. What's happening? Why was the Nadder suddenly so hostile against her human?

"_Iâ€| have to go, _I mumbled when Hiccup did not speak again. I began to walk backwards, still looking at the Nadder in case it decided to jump and crush me underneath its claws. Hiccup stepped forward, but before he could utter a word I had already run away from them.

"Hiccup turned back to the dragon, noting that her pupils had dilated once more, signalling to him that she was now in a calmer state of mind. He rubbed the skin around her nose horn and sighed. _What's wrong, girl? _He murmured. _Why did you react to Astrid that way? Are you ill?_"

"The dragon shot him a withering look before she stalked deeper into the woods, ruffling her wings and huffing out a loud snort.

"Hiccup stared after her and rubbed his neck in confusion."

* * *

><p>"As the date of the dreaded birthday ball drew nearer, Astrid found herself more and more shut in inside the manor house as she was caught up in a whirlwind of preparations. In the absence of a mother to fuss over her, her governess decided to take charge of the whole thing. Astrid could not understand why such a big fuss was being made over an insignificant birth year, especially since only five or so families were being invited.<p>

"Perhaps it was because the powerful _Jorgenson_ family was also coming.

"Astrid was _not _looking forward to this at all. She knew that some, if not all, of these families were going to stay over in Warborough Hall days after the party had ended. She had always found that guests somehow_always_ overstayed their welcome.

"She sighed as she walked down the portrait gallery with her governess on their way to the main foyer. She looked out the windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of her dragon somewhere. Perhaps she had gone back to the coast to fish. Oh, how she wished she was there with her beautiful blue Nadder, swooping through the clouds, diving down to the wavesâ€|

"_... is a fantastic idea, do you not think so Astrid?_"

"Astrid jolted back from her daydreams, not knowing what on earth her governess had just said.

"_I beg your pardon?_"

"Her governess sighed. _I asked what you thought of the idea of a themed ball, _she repeated. Her charge's mind, it seemed, was always in the clouds these days (and she was not very far off the mark).

"_I do not understand the need for this theme at all, _was Astrid's uncaring response.

"_Well, a theme always adds joviality to any party, don't you agree?_"

"_No. I think it's an abhorrent idea. _To her irritation her governess decided to push on.

"_It was your father's idea, actually. Besides, he thinks it's marvellous -_"

"_If you valued my father's opinion more than mine then why did you bother asking what I thought?_"

"Mary Sawyer willed herself not to snap at the selfish girl in front of her. _It is your birthday ball, Astrid, and -_"

"_Oh yes, that's why this whole ball was being meticulously planned by me._"

"_If I had not taken over, would you have planned it?_"

"_Of course not! If I had my way, we would not be celebrating this at all!_"

"Mary Sawyer finally lost her temper. _Do you think that this is simply about your birthday? Miss Hofferson! Open your eyes and look about. This is not only about you, this is also about your father. This is about your family. About Warborough Hall and its servants. Believe it or not, but the connections that your father is so desperately trying to forge between yourself and the families are not only to stabilise your future, but the future of so many tied to this family. _She paused only to take a breath. _You are a Hofferson, Astrid, and you best remember what it means to be born into this family. You may not like it, you may even wish to have been born into a different family, or a different class, but you, just like the rest of us, will need to make the best of your situation. Count yourself fortunate that you have a father who dotes on your wellbeing and the wellbeing of those in his employ, and that you have the safety of the Hofferson fortune should things fall apart. Do not throw it all away for a moment's whim. And please, _she pleaded as she grabbed Astrid's shoulders, _for the love of everything good, do not throw it all away for a moment's romance. Do not let a blacksmith's apprentice " or, for that matter, any man at all " cloud your judgement for even a minute._"

"The governess stepped back to look at her charge severely before she walked away, leaving Astrid speechless and fuming. How dare she?"

Hiccup and her were just friends! And she was not going throw anything over a moment's - or a lover's whim.

"Astrid was not as foolish as her governess thought she was. She understood perfectly where Miss Sawyer was coming from, though this just made her wish she could run away even more. She had a dragon now, after all. She could just fly away somewhere else where she could no longer be Astrid Hofferson, if she really wanted to. It would break her father's heart, truly, but only for a time, for she knew that there will be another Hofferson heir who could quite easily take her place should she leaveâ€¦ or die.

"She fisted her palm in her frustration and turned to look at her mother's portrait. A mother she had never known, yet in Astrid's secret heart she had always asked her for guidance. And, as always, Bertha's portrait gazed down upon her, the serene smile gracing her lips and keeping her advice to herself.

"Astrid sighed. She was a Hofferson, as her governess so eloquently pointed out. There were certain obligations that came with the name, certain responsibilities that even Astrid knew she could not easily run away from. Certain people she loved so much that she could not just leave them due to her selfish desires.

"She went to look for her governess and found her at the drawing room downstairs a few minutes later. She did not apologise â€" never, not for this â€" but she told her that she would very much like to be more involved in the preparations, in order to reconcile with the woman who was only trying to help.

"Because scratch the painted surface and you would have seen something else underneath all the glitter and gold."

* * *

><p>"The families started to arrive a couple of days before the actual ball. As Astrid predicted, five families in total sauntered in through the foyer. They were all her father's closest friends, not hers: from the amicable Andersons to the ostentatious Beaumonts, the radical-thinking Woodvilles to the ambitious Byrnes. And finally, to Astrid's dismay, the powerful Jorgensens arrived, their automobiles roaring through the gates and scaring the horses in their stables.<p>

"There were now roughly twenty or so guests residing in Warborough Hall.

"Out of all of these families, Astrid liked the Woodvilles best, mostly because of the way they seemed to rebel against the norm. They believed, for example, that women should have the same rights as men: a rather repulsive thought at the time, but for Astrid it made perfect sense. She liked hearing Mrs Woodville speak to the men as their equal, and vowed that she would be the same once she was of age.

"Astrid, however, liked the Woodville daughter least.

"Miss Heather Woodville, Astrid imagined, would have been the girl that her governess and her father would have wanted her to have been. She was raised as a headstrong child, like Astrid, yet had a calmer

disposition. She had the skill to flit in between social worlds. She knew when to flatter a man and when to render a man speechless. She knew how to get her way every time with just one coy smile. She was friendly enough to Astrid, and Astrid likewise to her, but Astrid's jealousy prevented them from being _good_ friends.

"You know, Miss Thorston, fate is a funny thing. For if Astrid only knew that Heather very nearly took her future happiness away from her, she would have liked her even less.

"There was, however, one close friend of her father's that was absent from all this social mayhem. The Haddocks had regretfully written that they would be unable to attend this ball, and to Astrid's surprise her father did not seem to mind much. It was very bizarre indeed to find her father not minding at all.

"And so she decided to ask why.

"Astrid found her father alone in the early dawn, on the morning of the ball, pondering by the lake as he often did most mornings. Her father's eyes brightened at her approach. _Astrid! You are up very early today. Too excited to sleep, hmm?_

"_Erâ€¦ yes. _She drew her shawls closer around her. _Father, may I ask you something? Why is Lord Haddock unable to visit?_

"Her father smiled down at her. _Why?_ _Were you hoping that he would arrive?_

"_Of course, _she automatically responded. _He is your most beloved friend, after all._

"_Ah. _There was a certain twinkle to her father's eyes_. No other reason?_

"Astrid glanced at him, confused. _No, was there supposed to be another reason?_

"Her father chuckled. _Perhaps not._

"She gave him a dubious glare. _Forgive me father, but should you not be sadder that he is not coming? _She gestured at his smiling face, and he relented.

"_I am quite sad that he is not able to attend, for I have not seen him since we were last in London. But he has asked Gobber to attend on his behalf, and Gobber, I am sure, will brighten up our already very colourful company with his presence. _He looked at her shrewdly. _Are you sure there was no other reason why you asked for Lord Haddock?_

"_No, _Astrid said blankly, and then realisation dawned on her, and she gave her father a furious look. _Father, if you were thinking that I was hoping to see a boy I barely remember, who I have not seen since we were very young, then I'm afraid that you are sorely mistaken._

"_You truly do not remember him?_

"_No! _Astrid exclaimed irritably.

"Her father simply gave her a knowing smile and turned back to stare at the lake. Astrid gathered her shawls around her once more and mimicked her father, glaring out into the water. She saw a golden dragon she had seen several times before leap into the air in the distance, its powerful wings beating hard in the crisp, morning air. Her father saw her eyes flick skywards, and wondered what she was looking at.

"He looked up, and suddenly felt a chill run up his spine.

"_Astrid, _he murmured, _What is it that you see?_"

"She glanced at him quickly. _Nothing._"

"_Is there something that you are not telling me?_"

"_No, father._"

"He looked at her critically before he sighed. _Well, if there's nothing else, will you go back to the manor and be good host for both of us? Our guests are, no doubt, wondering why the Hoffersons are not joining them for breakfast._"

"She groaned. _Do I really have to? Can't I just be a terrible host?_"

"Her father chuckled as he embraced her shoulder. _I shall follow you shortly. Chin up, sweet nomad. It is only for a week._"

"Astrid returned his embrace and leaned her head against her father. _I swear to you I am going to be a terrible lady of the house one day._"

* * *

><p>"Miss Thorston, are you listening?"<p>

Miss Hofferson's question cut through the fog of her story like a blade. I jerked up, startled out of my half-dreaming state, and looked at her confusedly for a moment.

"What?"

She sighed in exasperation. "You look like you have not slept in weeks. Missus Parsons also tells me that you have not been eating well."

I blinked at her blankly. "What?"

Miss Hofferson glared at me, and I thought back to her question, but could not for the life of me remember what it was. It didn't help that the old fox was right: I have not been sleeping or eating much. Ever since Miss Hofferson arrived back at the manor, just under two weeks ago, my life had revolved around her story so much that I felt myself living and breathing it every moment of my waking life, and thus eating and sleeping became a secondary necessity. The passing of the days were measured not by the ticking of the clock, but by the meals that Missus Parsons prepared for me. Toast or cereal meant it was early morning, soup or a sandwich meant that it was midday, and

pie or something hearty meant it was evening.

I glanced up and saw Miss Hofferson looking intently at me. She had asked me something againâ€|

I mentally slapped myself.

What was her question?

She sighed. "Get some sleep, Miss Thorston. We shall continue tomorrow."

"No!" I exclaimed. "I swear I'm fineâ€|"

"You most certainly are not."

"I assure you I am. Please," I pleaded. "Please continue your story?"

Her mouth was set in a thin, stubborn line. "Miss Thorston," she stated. "I require a hundred per cent of your attention when we are having these sessions, and I cannot have this if you have not had the proper amount of sleep." She rang the bell next to her. "Sleep tonight, and we shall continue the tale tomorrow."

I scowled at her, but her nurse had already arrived, and so I had no choice but to do as she bade. I stalked my way back to my bedroom in a foul mood, heartily wishing I could break something.

I looked around, and found a tray of steak and kidney pie upon my writing desk. Perhaps I could eat my dinner and smash the plate to make me feel better.

Yeah, that sounded good.

I wanted to act like an immature little brat so badly, even just for tonight.

However, just as I reached for my dinner, I found an envelope wedged in between the plate and the glass of water. I grabbed it excitedly, thinking quite irrationally that it was from my brother, but the postal stamp confused me. Why would he be writing to me from Scotland? I quickly opened the letter and recognised Fishleg's hasty scrawl.

Fishlegs? Waitâ€| Fishlegs! Scotland!

The Haddocks.

I sat on the bed and read his letter eagerly as I scarfed down my dinner.

"_In Scotland right now,_" he wrote. "_Only here for a short time to do a seminar for the University but I thought I'd do some digging around while I'm here andâ€| oh god. Are you trying to unearth the greatest mystery in the literary community? That is: Who Astrid Hofferson is, and with whom she fell in love with? If so: don't you worry Ruff â€" my lips are sealed._

"_I went to Chisholm House this morning â€" family home of the

Haddocks. The current surviving Haddock was not in residence, but I still got to tour around the place. Massive place â€" it shouldn't even be called a house. It's more likeâ€" a mansion. Anyway, your request to look for a dragons connection was bizarre, and it confused me, to say the least. I was not sure why you had asked it, but then I understood why once I arrived at the house._

"_Dragons. Everywhere. The family seemed to be obsessed with it. The building has ornaments of it everywhere â€" even their coat of arms has it. You'd think they'd go for a fish to tie it back to the 'Haddock' family name, but no. It's dragons. I wonder if there's a St George connection to this family too._

"_The son - you were rather interested in him, perhaps because he was also a rather interesting fellow. Liked inventing things, very skilful - everybody described him as being skinny as a beanpole. Not like his father at all. His name was Harailt â€" named after his great grandfather. And then, his second name was Eachann, in honour of his ancestor Eachann, the last chief of Clan Haddock in the 17th Century._

"_Erâ€" I suppose I won't bore you with the origins of the rest of his names._

"_Oh, and listen to this Ruff: He got married, but unfortunately not to your companion there in Warborough Hall. The woman he married was something of a mystery â€" she was always seen wearing a shroud of cloth over her face wherever she went, so only a handful of people actually knew her identity. Everybody else was kept in the dark: All they knew was that she was a high-born lady. Though there was one time when a strong wind blew, and the black cloth lifted enough for a maidservant to glimpse the face that was concealed underneath, and the maid maintained to all who would listen that the lady was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, with the clearest of eyes and the fairest of skin and the most delicate of faces._

"_The lady soon came to be known to all as the Dark Countess._

"_She was said to have only spoken French, and she would often disappear for days, weeks, even months at a time. She and Harailt had a son, and the lady who gave the tour of the house said that the couple loved each other very dearly._

"_That's all they could tell me about the previous Haddock generation. And, as with mysteries and family secrets, the older it got, the more corrupted the story became. Who knows now what is true and what is not?_

"_You've reeled me into this intrigue, Ruff. Just so you know. I'm hooked into solving this mystery. I will let you know when I find out more._

"_Fishlegs."_

I lay down on the bed, Fishleg's letter still in my hands, and thought.

I was no longer interested in the Haddocks, for the Haddock connection, at this point in the story, was no longer important. Though, like Fishlegs, I was rather intrigued by the _other _mystery

of the French-speaking Dark Countess. I decided to pursue her story after I had finished with Astrid's, since she was obviously connected with Miss Hofferson in some way.

And the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that the Haddock connection was not quite the dead end that I initially thought it was. Fishlegs mentioned the Haddocks were obsessed with dragon iconology. Now Hiccup the blacksmith's apprentice worked for the Haddock family, and Miss Hofferson made it clear that he came from a dragon training family. Perhaps the Haddocks employed him not only for his blacksmithing skills, but also for his vast knowledge on dragonsâ€|

I shook my head to stay awake, the fatigue of two weeks of sleepless nights finally settling in my bones. Now that I was lying on my bed, the call of sleep was far too strong for me to resist. I sighed and stood up to brush my teeth, lock my bedroom door, and turn off the lights.

When my head hit my pillow, I could not help but hope for the romance between Astrid and Hiccup to blossom, being the sad old sap that I was, especially now that the potential Haddock suitor established early in her tale was out of the way. Perhaps this was a story of unrequited love â€" the lady of the house and the blacksmith's apprentice would never have been allowed to marry each other.

My eyes slowly closed. Or perhaps they did? Did Astrid elope with Hiccup? Was this why she refused to tell her life's story to the media and other biographers in the past? Because of an age-old scandal?

I soon fell into a long and fitful sleep. I dreamt of Astrid and Hiccup, Harailt and the Dark Countess, and dragons and all the other ghostly possibilities of the tale. I woke up the following morning a little tired, my brain dancing with unanswered questions. Questions that needed to be written down and which only Miss Hofferson could answer.

I crawled out of my bed and sleepily walked to my writing desk. However, all the drowsiness in my brain lifted when I saw tarot card lying on top of my notebook which I was positive was _not_ _there_ when I hit the hay last night.

"What the hell?" I muttered as I picked up the card, the gold foil peeling off the intricate illustrations that depicted the meaning of this particular tarot.

My god. It can't be.

I whirled around and checked my door, and found that it was still locked from inside. I felt the blood drain away from my face when I realised that the Ghost had paid me a visit last night while I was in the deepest of slumbers.

I looked down and ran a thumb over the illustration. I wondered why the Ghost left me this card. I wondered what it all meant.

It was the Wheel of Fortune.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

And that concludes the Destiny Arc. Do you think Hiccup and Harailt are one and the same person? If not, who do you think Harailt was? And who is the Dark Countess (which is a character I based on the real life mystery of _the_ Dark Countess during the French Revolution)? Let me know - I'd love to hear your theories!

And I'm really sorry for the long wait for this chapter. The first chapter for the next arc is already 90% done so I should have it up by the end of the week =)

Thank you all so much for reading, and for the faves and the follows!

* * *

><p>Ferdoos: Fear not. You shall find out very soon:)

****LizzyLory****: Haha yay to hyperness! Why yes, Hiccup has a secret, and he shall reveal it very soon!

****Guest 1: ****Thanks :) Warborough Hall is a mix of Chatsworth House and Hopetoun House " though smaller in size but the general aesthetics and inspiration for the parklands are the same. Glad you picked that up!

****hpnarutardsjedipirate1234****: Thanks! So what did you think of the letter? :)

****Guest 2: ****Aww gosh thanks! 3

****Cat Eyed Blunder: ****Haha sorry about the giddy Hiccstrid feels. It _will _happen again" in the next chapter. Sorry :D

****Tyra: ****Thanks! I hope the pacing is alright with the Hiccup/Astrid relationship. I'm always worried that it's either too quick, or it's dragging on too much =_=_

****Josy Daky: ****Omg thank you so much for your reviews! I'm so glad you're enjoying the story so far. Thank you thank you thank you, your reviews made me so happy! I hope you enjoyed this chapter too :)

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which the ball finally happens.

12. Arc 2: Courtship - Chapter 11

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"There was an immediately perceptible vitality about her, as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering."

â€" F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896 - 1940

* * *

><p>ARC TWO - COURTSHIP

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Miss Hofferson did not send for me again until two nights later, and, for the first time ever, we conducted our session in her bedroom. I stepped inside and found it extremely large and plain, with just the barest of furnishings. Here was a simple bedside table, right next to a simple four-poster bed with no curtains. A writing desk was set against the window, and her wardrobes were against one side of the wall.

The bedroom was so unlike the lavishness of the other rooms in the house that I would not have believed it to have been a part of the house.

I greeted her as I closed the door behind me. She was propped up to a sitting position upon her bed, and she appeared to me to have withered since the last time I saw her. It was then that it truly struck me why time was so very important to Miss Hofferson.

Perhaps she noticed the concern in my eyes, for she went straight to her story before I even had the chance to pull up a chair.

I could never pity a woman with an iron soul such as hers. She was everything I aspired to be - everything I wanted to be. No, I did not feel sorry for her. I did, however, feel an overwhelming sadness.

Miss Hofferson was not only very ill. She was dying.

* * *

><p>"It was already past midnight, yet the ball did not appear to be winding down one bit, and Astrid was immensely exhausted, though she hid it rather well behind a well-practiced smile and honeyed, sparkling words. Dancing failed to lift her spirits. Heather could not stir the jealous competition within her. Not even hearing Missus Woodville's witty responses to Mr Byrnes' nonsense could inspire the happiness in Astrid.<p>

"Perhaps it was because the Ghost had not been in Warborough Hall for a very, very long time. Astrid missed her, and she just hoped that she was enjoying herself - wherever she may be - more than Astrid was.

"Oh, what she would give to be outside, flying with her Nadder and doing the sorts of tricks that would have made these ladies and gentlemen faint. Astrid smiled at the memory of the wind and the sunshine on her face as her Nadder did spins in the air.

"She could sneak outâ€¦ if only for a minute or two. After all, her slippers were starting to wear thin from all the dancing. Perhaps she could use that as an excuseâ€¦

"She gracefully finished her final round of talking with a group of guests just as the next dance was announced. She was about to sneak away when, to her dismay, Snotlout Jorgenson greeted her in a voice

that sounded just a little too loud.

"_Though you are shrouded in mystery, _he announced stoutly. _Our last dance enchanted me so much that I am convinced you are the most perfect lady in all of England_.

"Astrid nearly rolled her eyes at his poor attempt at poetry. _You must have mistaken me for another lady. _She feigned a laugh. _I fear I am the least perfect woman you have ever prevailed upon to have danced with._

"_You are most wrong, and I am definitely right._ He insisted, the thinly-veiled mockery in Astrid's previous statement completely lost to him. She suppressed a sigh.

"_Congratulations Mr Jorgenson, you have just proven that I am not the most perfect lady in all of England after all._

"Snotlout opened his mouth, but then realised that she was right. His cheeks reddened with embarrassment. _Then allow me to prove you wrong â€" may I have the next dance, my beautiful lady of the night?_

"_I would be most honoured, Mr Jorgenson, s_he began, knowing the rules, knowing that it would be most rude of her to turn him down. But then she noticed with a slight grimace that his hair had gone sweaty from too much drink and dance. She decided to decline him with as much grace as she could muster. _However my feet are a little tired, and my slippers have worn thin _

"_You can stand upon my shoes then._

"Oh, she would love to step on his toes all right. _Mr Jorgenson, _she feigned laughter once more. _The next dance is a jig, not a waltz - I'm afraid romance is working against you tonight._

"_No it's not! I'm the best man in this room, how can romance work against me?_

"_Then I fear that the other men in this room, who I have not yet danced with, will find me a most discourteous lady if I gave you the honour of dancing with me a second time. _She knew she was already being incredibly uncivil by the mere act of turning down his invitation, but she did not care, and thankfully all this was also lost to him.

"_Let them get jealous, _he whined, all pretence gone. _Do you not want to dance all night with the richest, most handsome man in this room?_

"_You are not a man yet, Mr Jorgenson,_ Astrid muttered. Thankfully he did not hear her.

"_My, my! _Miss Woodville suddenly appeared by Snotlout's elbow, all glitter and smiles. _I must say that I am enjoying this night far too much!_

"_She does not want to dance with me! _Snotlout pointed an accusing finger at Astrid, and Astrid's temper flared.

"_Take care of what you say next, Mr Jorgenson, _she said

dangerously. _They may very well be your last._

"_I've tried every trick in the book. What must I do to win your heart?_"

"_A woman's love cannot be won. It must earned. And if you think that I am the sort of woman who can be tricked into giving her love away so easily then you are sorely mistaken._"

"She saw Heather Woodville's eyes widen behind him in admiration, before she grinned conspiratorially. _I love this next dance, _she suddenly exclaimed._ I would dearly love to join in. I wonder if there is a man in this room willing to dance with me until my slippers break._"

"_I can be that man! _Snotlout eagerly volunteered, all animosity washed away by the prospect of dancing with a beautiful lady, his row with Astrid momentarily forgotten in his haste to mend his wounded pride. He turned to lead her to the middle of the room, and Heather turned her head to Astrid and gave her a wink. Astrid discreetly mouthed a thank you to her.

"_Wow, aren't you rude, _a man laughed behind her.

"Astrid whirled around in surprise and accidentally slapped the man in question in the face. He instantly yelped in pain, and a few of the guests turned a curious eye towards them.

"_Oh I beg your pardon! _Astrid gasped, her hands flying up to cover her mouth as her eyes widened. _Are you alright? I do apologise, I did not mean to hit _"

"Astrid did not finish her sentence, for she froze in shock at the sight of him.

"_Yeah, _he hissed._ You always never mean to hit me, right?_"

"He looked back at her as he rubbed his face, bright green eyes flashing in indignation, and she suddenly had an overwhelming urge to punch him in the face. She clenched her fists and turned away.

"_Hiccup, what are you doing here? _She growled instead. The last thing she needed was to keep one eye on the blacksmith's apprentice who decided to crash a private party, and another on the Beaumont boy who had started to make his way towards her. She pretended to not see his approach and began to weave around the room.

"Hiccup sighed and murmured a monologue behind her. _Well good evening to you to, Hiccup, how has your night been? Oh, it's been nice so far, Astrid, lovely night out. Great night, perfect night for flying _"

"_Shut up, Hiccup! Just shut up!_"

"_You lot were making too much noise, _Hiccup complained good-naturedly. _Do you even know what time it is?_"

"_Nearly one, _Astrid snapped as she made her way to the refreshments room. She turned to Hiccup and smiled apologetically. _I'm sorry.

I've been counting down the time until my esteemed guests here have exhausted themselves to oblivion. The sooner these dances finish, the sooner I can be myself once more._

"_Yes, because the other Astrid is so much more pleasant than this one._

"Astrid blanched at his words, and she poured herself some tea to hide her discomfort. She had to remind herself that he did not know anything about the well-kept secret of Warborough Hall. She heard the dancers take up the jig next door, and she willed herself to calm down. _You haven't answered my question, _she whispered, changing the subject as she brought the cup up to her lips.

"Hiccup looked at the assortment of cakes, cold tongues, and sandwiches upon the table. _What question was that again? _He asked calmly, and she had to fight the urge to hit him again. Instead, she set her cup down on the saucer with a clink.

"_Why are you here? I mean - What are you doing here? Are you trying to get kicked out of this house?_

"_Oh, _Hiccup chuckled._ I don't know. The party sounded fun from outside, so I decided to join in._

"_You idiot! _Astrid hissed. _This is a private party! If Gobber finds youâ€¦|_

"_He won't, _he waved her off and took a large slice of cake. _And if he does, I'm sure he'll be far too drunk to care._ He licked the sugar from his fingers as he watched the other guests milling around, looking at him curiously.

"It was only then that Astrid looked at his attire in its entirety. It was true that his mop of auburn hair still sat upon his head in the same way, the ends of his hair sticking out everywhere. The freckles and the sharp, green eyes were still there. The familiarity that this boy truly was Hiccup comforted Astrid somewhat. It was, however, the clothes he was wearing that felt absolutely foreign to her, and looked absolutely strange on _him_. He was wearing a ball-suit made from the very best cloth and of the latest style cut, and it was a suit fit for a well-born gentleman. Where did he get these clothes from?

"Hiccup noticed her ogling him, and he lightly blushed under her scrutiny. _Oh, you must remind me to thank your father for lending me this outfit. Don't ask me why he keeps my size of clothing around, though, _he said when he saw that Astrid was about to speak._ I don't know and I thought it impertinent to ask. I'm just grateful that he invited me to the party â€" though in secret. _He suddenly turned serious._ You must not tell anyone that I am here under your father's invitation or he will flog me._

"_Youâ€¦| heâ€¦| Iâ€¦| _Astrid found it hard to string words together. What was her father playing at? Was he pushing Astrid and the blacksmith's boy _together_? No, what a preposterous idea! It was more likely that Lord Hofferson invited the boy to keep Astrid's temper in check.

"Yes. Thatâ€¦| that must be the reason why her father invited him,

though she did not believe this reasoning herself.

"Astrid set her cup and saucer down on the table. She suddenly did not know where to go, or what to do, or what to say. One of her closest friends was standing right there, right next to her, and she did not know what to say to him. His easiness suddenly made her feel incredibly awkward in her own party. He looked far too comfortable in this settingâ€¦ as ifâ€¦ as if he's beenâ€¦"

"_How can you be so comfortable here? _She blurted out. He looked more at ease than her, and this was _her _party, and _her _house! _Have you been to a private ball before? _She demanded.

"_Oh, plenty of times. _He turned to her, setting his plate down on the table. _My mother often brought me, when she was alive._

"_But she was only a servant! _Astrid exclaimed. _She would not have been allowed to bring you to a private ball!_

"The last dance finished with great applause, and the murmur of the crowd moving to the refreshments room urged Astrid to move back to the music room. However, to her dismay, the music master announced that they would be playing an English country waltz â€" upon her request, for it was her favourite dance â€" in just a few moments. Several eyes landed on her.

"_English country waltz, hmm? _Hiccup murmured by her elbow, and she was surprised that he had followed her into the music room. _This dance is a little out-of-style, don't you think? Out-of-style by, I don't know, maybe half a century or so? I doubt many of the younger people here would know the steps._

"_Well, that's the point. Besides, it happens to be my favourite, Hiccup, so just be quiet! Andâ€¦ and stop following me!_

"She heard him sigh. _I never said she was a servant, you know. _He murmured quietly.

"Astrid graciously smiled at everyone and nobody in particular, before she realised that he had said something to her._ What did you say?_ Curiously, she noticed that some of the older guests were smiling at him. Even the servants were gaping at him, and she immediately wanted to tell him to run away before he could get into any trouble.

"_I said: I never said my mother was a servant._

"_You did too! Now Hiccup, you need to -_

"_Trust me, I didn't._

"Astrid sighed. _Hiccupâ€¦ please, not now. If you still haven't noticed, you need to run away, and I am at this moment far too busy to argue with you._

"_What are you busy with? All you're doing is smiling and nodding at people._

"_I'm busy thinking of who I shall give this dance to without insulting any of the families here. _She began weaving around the

couches, looking for her father, thinking that perhaps she could ask him to dance with her instead.

"Where was he when she needed him?

"_You haven't decided who to give your favourite dance to yet? _He asked incredulously.

"_No. I mean yes! I shall dance with my father._

"He snorted, and then he discreetly touched her arm to get her attention again. _Why don't you dance with me, _Hiccup suggested simply, and it was Astrid's turn to snort an incredulous laugh.

"_Hiccup, that will definitely count for insulting my guests._

"_Why?_

"Astrid nearly screamed up to the heavens in irritation. She turned and hissed at him. _For goodness sake Hiccup! Can you imagine what they will say when they find out I danced with a blacksmith's apprentice tonight?_

"The boy smiled cheekily as he whispered: _Be a rebel for once, why don't you?_ Astrid was just about to shove him away when he gracefully bent his body to give her a courteous bow, his right hand lifting up to her as he murmured: _Miss Hofferson, may I have the pleasure of this dance?_

"She stood stock still and stared at him. This was _not _Hiccup. A few of the guests turned and whispered to each other, no doubt wondering who this mysterious newcomer was. Astrid looked around and saw the shy Anderson boy, the detestable Byrnes boy, and the persistent Jorgenson boy all walking towards her. She looked back at Hiccup's extended hand and, in an act of desperation, wordlessly slipped her fingers in his.

"For the first time since the party started she felt exhilaration overcome every fibre of her being.

"He smiled as he straightened up and led her to the middle of the room, at the head of the line of couples that was quickly forming. The back of Astrid's neck prickled as she felt the dozens of eyes upon her. After a while, she saw Snotlout glare at Hiccup from his place several couples down the line, a pretty Beaumont girl standing in front of him.

"Astrid felt a little faint as she looked back at Hiccup, whose eyes seemed to be smiling despite his neutral face. She wanted - to be angry with him, wanted to punch the living daylights out of him for forcing her into this _very _unfortunate situation that would no doubt set tongues on fire tomorrow morning.

"The music started, and the ladies and gentlemen bowed to each other as the dance finally went underway. Astrid and Hiccup stepped forward as one, brought their hands together as one, started to dance as one, and Astrid realised that he knew this dance well, knew each and every step to take, when to let other couples circle them, when to turn and

where to lead her, when to wait. This was something no blacksmith's apprentice could have learnt once and retained forever: this was something that was learnt _and _done over and over again. _He has done this before_, Astrid realised in disbelief. _He hasâ€|_

"_It's okay to speak while dancing, you know, _Hiccup said after a minute too long of enduring Astrid's wide-eyed gaze.

"Astrid blushed lightly, suddenly and implausibly shy in front of this mutton-head. _Forgive me, _she murmured. _But I am afraid to put into words what is currently on my mind, Mrâ€| er, forgive me, Mrâ€|_

"Goodnessâ€| she did not even know his last name!

"Hiccup by now had given up trying to hide the smile that had been tugging at his lips ever since the dance started. _You don't have to be so formal with me, you know. It's still me. I'm still me._

"Astrid narrowed her eyes. _Are you really?_

"_Astrid, _I'm sure I'm definitely still me._

"_Then tell me: What is your name?_

"He raised an eyebrow as he guided her through the dance. _You'd think you'd know my name by now after all the time we've spent together--_

"_No, I meant your real name! _She stressed.

"He stared at her for a moment. _I'm Hiccup. Still Hiccup underneath this expensive outfit._

"_And your last name?_

"He sighed. _Astrid â€|_

"_Hiccup, please_. _Your last name._

"He averted his eyes. _Why is my last name suddenly so important to you?_

"Astrid puffed out her cheeks. _Because I thought I was your friend! _She felt the hand that was innocently holding her hand up curl possessively.

"_You are my friend! _He whispered back fiercely before he sucked in a breath to calm his nerves, waiting for the couple next to them to finish their steps. _Astridâ€|_ he whispered.

"She waited for him to continue speaking, and when he did not she prompted him with a gentle: _Hiccup?_

"_Okay, okay! _He finally relented. _But first... _Do you â€| do you remember your promise? That I will always have your friendship? That you will always remember me kindly?_

"_Of course I do._

"_Do I still have your word?_"

"_Of course, _Astrid repeated, though Hiccup noted the cautious edge that had crept in her voice, and this caused him to stammer, all confidence gone.

"_Oh boy, you're not going to like this._"

"_I figured as much, _Astrid scowled.

"He stared at her. _You really don't remember the first time we met, do you?_"

"_Of course I do! By the woods, when I thought you led me there to kidnap me."_"

"_No. Before that, Astrid. As childrenâ€¦_"

"Astrid glowered at him, thinking he had completely lost his mind, but then she remembered the familiarity she felt when she first spied on him from behind the foyer curtains. Back then she felt that she had met him before â€" she even told the Ghost as much â€" but she could not put a finger to where she's met him before it. But â€" and her eyes widened as realisation dawned on her - she had met him before. She had, a long time ago. When they were mere children, bickering and fighting andâ€¦"

"The pieces of the puzzle finally fell into place

"It all suddenly made sense. Her father's actions should have been a giveaway, from the moment he bent and asked a blacksmith's apprentice if he truly did not want to stay in one of the lavish rooms in the house, all the way down to the secret smiles that her father gave every time she and Hiccup were together.

"She suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"How could she have been so blind?"

"_Mr Haddock, _Astrid whispered.

"Before Hiccup could respond, the music ended, and the dancers curtsied to each other once more. Astrid and Hiccup tore their eyes from one another and turned in the direction of the musicians to applaud them.

"When Astrid looked back at him, she found him smiling mischievously. A parting gift, Miss Hofferson, he murmured before he promptly kissed the air above her hand and stepped away. She heard a few of the older guests greet him, but he excused himself as he walked swiftly out of the room, suddenly very afraid of what her reaction would be.

"But he need not have feared, for he left Astrid absolutely speechless, motionless, and with a raging blush.

"_Who were you dancing with, Miss Hofferson? _Miss Beaumont breathed behind Astrid.

"_I believe that would be Lord Haddock's son, _Mrs Anderson suddenly appeared beside her.

"_I did not know the Haddocks were invited, _was the Beaumont girl's haughty response.

"_My dear Miss Hofferson, _Mrs Byrnes murmured next to her. _Why did you not tell us that Lord Haddock was here? You must introduce us to him and his son " at once!_

"_I didn't know" _Astrid said faintly. _I never knew... but I should have known" all the signs were there" _

"_They probably intended to surprise you, _Mrs Anderson said sympathetically, completely mistaking the meaning behind Astrid's astonishment. _Lord Haddock and your father are such good friends after all" _

"_I do not think Lord Haddock is here, _Astrid interrupted.

"_Just the son then? _Heather Woodville murmured.

"Astrid nodded wordlessly. Yes, just Hiccup, all this time.

"_I believe his name is Harailt, _Mrs Byrnes chattered.

"_You must introduce us to him at once, _Miss Beaumont piped up.

"_A wonderful idea! _Mrs Byrnes looked around. _Where has my daughter Georgiana gone off to?_

"Astrid felt suffocated by the sudden crowd of women around her, all vying for her attention, all vying to be introduced to that mutton-head who dared to ask for her trust and friendship when he was not who he claimed to be.

"Hiccup.

"Or rather, Mr Haddock" all this time" and"

"She excused herself from the crowd, making a beeline in the direction where he had disappeared to.

"Oh yes. She was determined to punch him when she catches him."

* * *

><p>My mouth was hanging open.<p>

"Hiccup was the Haddock boy?" I finally exclaimed.

Miss Hofferson smiled.

"I" I cannot believe it," I swept a hand through my hair. "Why was he keeping it a secret?"

"No questions, Miss Thorston." Miss Hofferson frowned. "You have already cheated enough."

I quickly flipped through my notes, looking over the clues that Miss

Hofferson left like breadcrumbs. And it was there. All there, yet I was too dense to have followed it.

I perused my notebook, muttering to myself. Hiccup the boy with his distinctive green eyes peeking from behind his mud-smeared face. Miss Hofferson's father's discomfort at allowing the son of his most cherished friend to sleep at the servant's quarters " even though he was just a blacksmith's apprentice. Astrid's initial reaction at seeing Hiccup. Hiccup's initial reaction at being alone with Astrid

The sly old fox! If I had missed these things, what else in the story have I completely overlooked?

I had not realised that Miss Hofferson had not spoken for a while until the fire cracked in the hearth, made louder than it truly was due to the echoes it made in the sparse bedroom. I looked up at Miss Hofferson and found her eyes closed and her eyebrows drawn together. She was shallowly breathing through chapped lips.

A small surge of panic swept through me.

"Miss Hofferson?" I whispered tentatively, but she held out a thin hand to hush me.

"A moment, please," she muttered. After a while, she opened her eyes. "I'm afraid we will have to cut our session a little shorter tonight."

"Of course!" I immediately said, though I was disappointed that she was stopping at such a crucial part of the story, and especially after she had dismissed me so unceremoniously a couple of nights ago.

"We shall continue tomorrow evening." She rang her bell, then looked at me apologetically. "I am very sorry for these delays, Miss Thorston."

I smiled reassuringly at her. "That's okay, I kind of understand. As long as you don't always leave me hanging, otherwise I might just punch a hole through a wall." I gathered my things and was about to leave when another thought struck me. If Hiccup was Mr Haddock, and Astrid was unmarried, then

The Dark Countess.

I turned back to her. "May I ask one more thing, Miss Hofferson?"

She grimaced in pain. "Miss Thorston," she started, but I interrupted her.

"It won't take long, and I don't think it's cheating, but it's something to do with Mr Haddock " with Hiccup."

She said nothing as she glared at me.

I took a deep, nervous breath. "You see, I've been researching er, that is... it has been brought to my attention I mean anyway the point is, if Hiccup was Mr Haddock, and you're obviously

unmarried " and I know for a fact that he married someone else - does that mean" | um" | did his affections with you " I mean, were you and him ever" | "

She smiled shrewdly through the pain. "I'm afraid I was never I love with him, if that was what you were bumbling about. We were merely friends."

"So this was not unrequited love," I murmured. "Not for you anyway" | but what about Hiccup?"

She shook her head. "Hiccup fell in love with another woman " madly in love, even, and she in turn loved him. They suited each other perfectly."

"The Dark Countess," I murmured, and I saw her grin grow wider. "Oh my god, you know her identity!"

"Of course I know her identity," she said, just as Lisa and Missus Parsons entered her room.

"Who was she?" I asked feverishly, but Lisa " sweet, gentle, Lisa " gave me a disapproving look as she shooed me away. I tried to look around her arm and called to Astrid.

"Miss Hofferson, please " a name!"

Missus Parsons pushed me away roughly and shook her head. I was about to shove her back just as hard, when I caught Miss Hofferson's pale, strained face.

Oh god" |

"Miss Hofferson?" I turned to Lisa. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She will be if you just leave and allow her to rest!" She snapped.

I clenched my fists, but then realised that this was a fight that I could not win. Miss Hofferson was far too ill to continue tonight, and so I agreed to quietly leave. However, just as I crossed the door, Miss Hofferson called weakly from her bed once more.

"Miss Thorston," she croaked. "Before I forget: I had taken the liberty to invite Mr Ingerman over. I would very much like to hear what he thinks about the Haddocks, and anything else he found out upon visiting Chisholm House."

The blood rushed to my ears. "What?" I exclaimed, but Missus Parsons had already closed the door in my face.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

And so begins Arc Two. This Arc will not be as long as Arc One, but I know it will be a joy to read for many of you :)

And if you've been following this story and haven't reviewed yet, if it's not too much trouble, I would really be grateful if you could

take the onset of Arc Two as an opportunity to let me know what you think of the story so far :) I can only make this story better if I know what I'm doing right, or which parts are keeping you interested :)

This ball was based on the party scene from that wonderful BBC movie, Miss Austen Regrets.

Once again, thank you all so much for reading, and for the favs and the follows and the reviews! I am ever so grateful for all your support.

* * *

><p>LizzyLory: Thanks! :) Haha from hyper to sleepy. I hope you liked this chapter too!

****Ferdoos:** ****You're absolutely right about Hiccup! The Countess, meanwhile, isâ€|**

****Josy Daky:** ****Yep, Harailt is Hiccup :) Thank you so much for your review, and I am so glad you're enjoying my style of writing! That's truly one of the best compliments I have ever received, so thank you so, so much!**

****Cat Eyed Blunder**:** A bit of both, so I'm very glad you noticed! Thanks so much for your review :)

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which Hiccup reveals more!

PS: Just a friendly reminder that this is ultimately a Hiccstrid fic, so please don't freak out by what's happened in the latter part of this chapter.

13. Arc 2: Courtship - Chapter 12

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"_The truth is rarely pure and never simple."_

â€" _Oscar Wilde, 1854 â€" 1900_

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TWELVE:

I fired off a message to Fishlegs that very same night, demanding to know when he was going to arrive, blasting him for not telling me that Miss Hofferson had invited him to the manor.

I hoped that my phone had enough signal bars to successfully send my message...

And then I waited for Astrid's summons again. The doctor â€" Humphreys, his name was â€" arrived the following morning, and I walked to where her room was located and waited outside the door in case she was feeling better enough to continue. Unfortunately, when

the doctor finally came back outside after what seemed like hours, he closed the door behind him, nodded in my direction, and motioned for me to follow him.

"How is Miss Hofferson?" I asked tentatively as I walked with him to the front doors.

"In far worse health than I'd like," was his response. He shrugged on his coat and wound a scarf around his neck before continuing. "She _is, _however, better than the last time I saw her. She says that storytelling soothes the illness to something more manageable. It is like a remedy, for her, to finally let the truth out after all this timeâ€¦" He smiled at me. "She is grateful that she has such a receptive audience, but asks for your utmost patience."

"Er... I'm not really a very patient woman."

"Then it is I who must beg for your patience," he said. "Storytelling may have properties that no amount of medicine can match, but I am still worried that your sessions may overly tax her."

I looked at him shrewdly. "I can hardly command myself to wait patiently for our next meeting: What on earth makes you think I can command Miss Hofferson to stop in the middle of a session?"

He stared at me for a second before he barked out a laughter. "Touche, Miss Thorston. Touche. I can see why she enjoys your company so much. You are very like her. However, my request still stands: sessions in moderation. Please remember: though Miss Hofferson often exudes an undeniable strength, she is still extremely ill." He opened the door and touched the brim of his hat. "Good day, Miss Thorston."

* * *

><p>I begrudgingly decided to heed the doctor's plea. Doctors know best after all, right? And so when Astrid's summons did not come that day, instead of hanging around outside her bedroom door to nag her to continue her story from behind the wooden panel, I decided to spend my time a little more wisely by looking through my previous notes, trying to catch what else I had missed...<p>

I must admit that I was incredibly miffed over the fact that she said she was never in love with Hiccup â€" er, Harailt. Mr Haddock. Little mud boy turned dragon boy. It was disappointing, because everything he did pointed to the fact that he was falling in love with her. How did he fall out of love? Or more importantly: _did he ever really fall out of love_? Who did he fall "madly in love" with in the end, if it wasn't Astrid? Was he just another character in passing, like the governesses, or the guests in the ball?

And then I remembered the Dark Countess, and I knew that Hiccup must still have played a central role in Astrid's life. Because why else would Miss Hofferson keep his wife's identity a secret from me if Mr Haddock was not important?

There must be a reason why Hiccup was a recurring character.

And there must be a reason why the Dark Countess' identity was a secret, revealed only to a fewâ€¦

Astrid finally called for me the following afternoon, and I excitedly walked to her bedroom just as the dim light of an autumn afternoon started to filter through the windows. Her door was ajar, and I entered her room to find her sitting primly on her bed. I silently waited for Lisa to finish putting a pillow behind Miss Hofferson's back before I drew a chair close to her.

Lisa gave me a small smile as she left the room "a little apologetic, perhaps from the way she behaved the last time we met. I turned back to Miss Hofferson and found her looking much better, just as Doctor Humphreys said. I told her just as much, and it made her laugh.

"Storytelling does that to me," she murmured. "Though I never knew that delving into the past would be more beneficial to my wellbeing than I originally thought. I thought that it would be my undoing."

"You said in your first letter to me that you no longer wanted to weave half-truth stories of your life," I replied. "Perhaps you're just feeling the effects of that well-worn cliché. You know: 'The truth will set you free'."

She grinned at my terribly corny comment. "Ah, I'm surprised that you remembered what I wrote! I wonder what else you'll remember from that wealth of information that I have told you so far..." She settled more comfortably against the pillows. She wore that familiar, peaceful look on her face that told me that she was gathering the past around her, and that our magic would start once again. And so it surprised me when she did not immediately launch into her story.

Instead, she talked about death.

"An angel from the afterlife visited me a few nights ago," she said quietly, sadly. She suddenly paused, and she put a hand upon her heart as her eyes suddenly shone with unshed tears, taking me by surprise. I had never seen Miss Hofferson cry before. I'd seen her angry, and happy... even distressed. But on the verge of tears? This steely eyed empress did not cry... it just seemed so... unnatural...

I pressed my lips together. I felt bad for thinking that...

It took her a few breaths before she found the strength to continue. "The angel spoke in a voice that both soothed and frightened me, and it had the face of my long, lost beloved, both terrible and beautiful to behold. It told me that my time has come, and offered a familiar hand for me to take. I very nearly accepted the angel's offer, very nearly ran to those open, inviting arms. So great was this ache and longing to be whole again that I nearly... But a memory of a promise stirred in me... And though I dearly wanted to finally be rejoined to my beloved, I... had to refuse. Do you know why I refused, Miss Thorston?"

A chill had settled on the back of my neck as I shook my head. Her calm, blue gaze settled on mine as she continued. "I refused, because I did not want to leave this life without finishing the most important story of my life. I did not want to leave without finishing

my beloved's story. And so I made a deal with that angel. I asked for more time, to stay here longer " at least, long enough for me to finish telling my story. Once finished, I told the angel that it was free to take my breath, for I will finally be unburdened of a lifetime of lies. No more hiding, no more half-truths. I will finally be free once I have finished this story." She smiled. "I will not leave you hanging, Miss Thorston, that is a promise. Besides, I do not want you punching holes in my house when I'm gone."

I exhaled a breath, remembering the offhand joke that I made last night. My chest felt unfamiliarly tight...

I steelled myself. Now was not the time to think of Astrid dying...

"I'll keep you to your word, then," I quietly said instead.

She smiled, and then narrowed her eyes at me. "I must admit that I'm surprised you have not yet asked who my beloved was."

I shrugged. "I trust that you will tell me, in due time. I mean, once in a while I may want to cheat and take a peek at the last chapter, but with this one I can tell that this is important to you. And so I won't I ask. I will wait until you are ready to tell me."

"Mmm... very wise," she murmured. "Hiccup would have benefitted greatly from a bit of sense when he decided to out himself at the ball. You know, he began to beat himself up right after he ran away. _Why? W__hy?! _He thought to himself. _Why did he decide to attend the ball?_ What possessed him to finally reveal his true identity to Miss Hofferson, and at such bad timing too as in the midst of a _dance_?"

"_Fool! _He thought to himself as he briskly walked away.

"Nevertheless, the damage was already done. As it was, he knew he could no longer hide in the smithy, or fly away and wait until the storm blows over. The families now knew that a Haddock was in residence, and so Hiccup Haddock must also now play his part, or risk embarrassing his father. And the last thing Hiccup wanted was to be a source of embarrassment to his father, _especially_ when Lord Haddock was not even there.

"But still he rushed away from the celebrations. He walked past servants who stopped and gaped at the blacksmith's apprentice in his finery, some hissing at him to get out of sight. He turned a corner towards the blissfully empty portrait gallery when suddenly, he heard Astrid calling him far behind. He looked behind his shoulders, and walked faster.

"Oh boy... she sounded angry_..._"

"_Hiccup, get back in here! _Her voice called faintly. His heart beat faster as he nearly ran down the corridor, a dozen pairs of painted, dead Hofferson eyes following his every move. The stairs to the main foyer was but a few steps away. All he had to do was run down it, barge out of the doors, whistle for Toothless, and fly away to safety.

"But he did not even make it to the stair's balustrade, for a hand suddenly grabbed him from behind and yanked him back with incredible force. He lost his footing in the carpet and fell back so heavily that he took Astrid with him to the ground. His sharp, bony elbow accidentally dug into her chest upon impact, and she gasped in pain.

"He immediately panicked. _Oh my gâ€| sorry! I'm so, so sorry! I didn't mean toâ€| I'm so sorry!_

"_Getâ€| get off meâ€| _Astrid wheezed. He scuttled away from her, though he did not get far as his back thudded against the wall.

"_S... sorry!_

"She glared at him as she massaged her sternum, her hair now a mess around her face. _Did you really think you can run away from me? _She growled.

"He breathed out a nervous chuckle. _Yeah, actually, I did. _He winced when she threw him daggers from her eyes. _How did you catch me so quickly anyway?_

"She scoffed. _You don't know this house like I do. You've never been a shadow in this house like I've been. You've never been a ghost. I **know **this house inside out, I **know **this house's secrets. So don't you dare run away from me again._

"Hiccup glowered at her. _Oh no no no no. You see, if I know that you're going to be punching me, or shoving my face in the mud again, I'm definitely going to run away from you. Again._

"_Even if it's well deserved?_

"_Even if it's well deserved._

"_Then you're a coward!_

"_That may be true, but you know I can never win a fist fight against you. Might as well run._

She blinked in disbelief. "_You... you... you're despicable! S_he spat. _You coward! You will not even stay to fix the mess that you've created? Your solution to your mistakes - to your lies - is to run away?_

"Hiccup opened his mouth, but shut it again. He knew there was no use arguing with her - he _knew _that he was in the wrong, and so also knew that he could not win this. It was only the Haddock stubbornness that kept him from admitting this out loud, and so he silently fumed as he prepared to get up.

"Astrid, however, was not done with him. She lunged at him and pinned him to the ground. They wrestled as he tried to get her off of him, but she _was _so much stronger than him, and he finally gave up when she strongly pinned his hands to the ground.

"_You will **not **go anywhere until you have told me why you did it, _she snarled in his face.

"He glared at her for a second. _Alright!_ He shouted._ Fine! I'm a coward. I am weak. Happy? What else do you want to hear?_"

"She hit his chest hard with her open hands in frustration, nearly knocking the wind out of him. _Tell me the truth!_"

"_You already know the truth!_"

"_Not that truth -!_ Astrid momentarily choked in her anger. She took a deep breath. _Why did you keep it a secret? Why did you lie? Why did you lie **to me?**_"

"_But I never lied! _Hiccup cried out defensively.

"Astrid laughed. _Oh yes, that's right, you never lied. You just did not tell me the whole truth!_"

"_... yeah. Which is differentâ€¦ to a lieâ€¦_"

"_I don't believe this!_ _You stubborn, rat eating
-_"

"_Astrid..._"

"_ - son of a half-troll! I trusted you with everything._"

"_But you have to understand - "_

"_I trusted you with my lifeâ€¦ **I trusted you! **Yet you repay our friendship with thisâ€¦ thisâ€¦_"

"_I **couldn't** tell you! _He finally cried out. _It was never because I didn't **want **to. God, I wanted to tell you. I even lov- But I c- I couldn't because... I just couldn't tell you, alright?_"

"_Why? _She nearly pleaded.

"Hiccup sighed.

"_Hiccup, why?_"

"He glanced back up at her and saw the hurt behind those eyes.

"His face softened.

"_Astrid, _he murmured, his hand itching to reach up and cradle her face...

"The hurt, betrayed look in her eyes was unbearable. And so he gave up to her. He could not turn back now, could not choke back the words that soon fell from his lips... he could not stop himself even if he wanted to.

"No more lies.

"But... not the whole story either. Not yet, if ever.

"_It was part of the reason why I came here as a blacksmith's

apprentice, _he began. _You see, Astrid, when my mother passed away a few years ago, I becameâ€¦ lost. I needed to find myself again, outside of being the Haddock heir. If it weren't for Toothless I probably would have drowned..._ He paused and looked away from her, speaking quickly:_ And my father of course told your father, and your father felt sorry for me, and they plotted, etcetera etcetera, the letter from your father came, along with letters from the other dragon trainers in the areaâ€¦ news of dragons disappearingâ€¦ and so I came here... you know, as Gobber's apprentice, rather than as Lord Haddock's son._

_ "I still don't understand why -?_

_ "Hiccup snorted. _Come on, Astrid, think about it! __We - that is, my father and I - we did not want to be a burden to you and your father. I mean... you've seen how your guests reacted to me at the ball. If they had known earlier that I was in residence, they would have made all manner of excuses to... you know... visit. Besides, if word got out that I had been spending a lot of time in the company of Miss Astrid Hofferson, they'd start talking about... well... you know.._

"Astrid pressed her lips together as a blush rose to her cheeks. What he was saying was true, but...

_ "But why didn't you tell ****me****?_

"He sighed. _It was supposed to be a new start, _he muttered. _Or at least, the illusion of one. Nobody but your father knew who I was. I must have changed a lot, for even the butler and the housekeeper and the gardeners and all the older servants did not recognise me. But even so, I thought that you at least would know... and I was tremendously surprised to find out that you didn't recognise me either. And when I realised that, I thought that it would be more convenient to play the same charade that I played with the servants. Why? Because I didn't care about you, nor wanted to ****care**** about you... I just wanted to be Hiccup the blacksmith's apprentice, and to just do my job, both as a blacksmith and a dragon trainer. But then... we became friends, even though we fought a lotâ€¦ and when you bonded with your Nadder, I told myself that I would tell you. Because that's what friends do, right? But then I became scaredâ€¦ scared that it would ruin our friendship, scared that it would ruin us. But I knew that it would be the right thing to do to tell you. And so I told myself: tomorrow. I will tell her tomorrow. But all of my tomorrows turned to weeks... and so I told myself: I will tell her after I teach her this, I will tell her after we have done thatâ€¦_

_ "But you should have just told me sooner-_

_ "Don't you see, Astrid?_ He cried out. _I couldn't do it! There were so many times when I had let the opportunity pass, because I simply couldn't do it!_

_ "She mulled over his words. He said he _couldn't _do it, not _wouldn't_. He was implying that the decision was out of his hands... why?

"He reached for her hand without thinking as he continued._ After that, it was already too late... I didn't want to shatter our

friendship by admitting that I had been keeping my real identity secret from you. _

_"And there it was. The real reason at last, and Astrid... well, she sympathised with him. Understood exactly what he meant, because she too had been keeping a secret from him... a secret that would _definitely_ ruin their friendship if she told him...

"Hiccup squeezed her hand. _I did not want to shatter this memory of the best summer I have ever experienced in such a long, long time. I didn't expect to be friends with you! I didn't even expect to â€" _His breath suddenly caught in his throat as he flushed.

"_Didn't expect w_hat? _Astrid demanded, and he brought his hands up to his face and groaned.

"_I... I... _He stammered.

"Astrid grabbed his hands and pulled it roughly away from his face. _You can't stop now, Hiccup. _

"He looked at her, fighting the urge to run, for he knew that there was no way out of this one...

"He bit his lip.

"No more lies.

_"I like you, okay? _Hiccup finally murmured. _I really, really like you. I think I might... even... be falling..._

"And there it was. That unsaid word. That most powerful of words. She blinked, trying to process his meaning, then quickly blushed when she realised that she had been straddling him all this time, and holding his hands, her face inches away from his...

"She jumped away from him as if she had been scalded. No, she thought. This can't be happening... she'd notice if he was falling for her. Right?

"_I never knew, _she murmured.

"He shrugged. _I kept it well hidden. _He looked up at her shyly. _So... d_o you... do you also feel any sort of, you know, affection... for me... too?__>

"She blinked. Did she like him too? She tried to think back on whether her feelings for him over the past months were anything but innocent friendship and brotherly love. But try as she might, she found that she... did not really return his sentiments.

"Should she be returning his sentiments?

"Hiccup sat up, his face red. _I didn't expect to care for you, or like youâ€|_ He repeated. _I'm so sorry._

"_What are you saying sorry for? _She demanded, her heart thudding madly, and he bit his lip again out of nervousness.

"No, no, you __misunderstand me. __I'm not sorry for liking you. How could I? I've never been this happy in such a long time, every day that I'm with you, every moment that we're together, even when we're bickering, I feel like I am... I mean, I don't know! All I know is that I really like you. What I'm apologising for is... this. This mess. I messed it up... our friendship. And I'm sorry that even though I like you, Astrid, I... cannot fall in love with you._

"Why not?"

_"He buried his face in his hands. _If I told you, you are going to hate me even more._

"You can't be worse off than you already are.

"But..."

"Hiccup.

"I..."

"Just spit it out!"

_"__I was already promised to another before I arrived here, alright!_ He cried. _Before I was even born, in fact. You're not the only one who's had their destiny mapped out for them by their father. At least you're free to choose who to give your hand to in marriage, whereas I have to defer to my father's wishes, whether I want to or not!_"

"Much to Hiccup's irritation, she began to laugh._ Hiccup, if there's one thing I know about you, it's that you're too headstrong for your own good. You'll probably find a loophole, or even downright rebel against your father. Besides: the 'age of arranged marriages are long gone'. You said so yourself._

"Yesâ€¦| perhapsâ€¦| in normal society... but not between, you know, dragon families.

_"Oh really? _She snorted, still smiling, thinking that he was jesting. He looked at her steadily.

_"Yesâ€¦| the dragon trainers have to keep the knowledge alive, and to keep it alive weâ€¦| need to keep alliances intact. And one way to keep an alliance strong and intact is through marriage... _He trailed off.

"Her smile slowly disappeared. _You... you're not joking?_"

_"_He shook his head miserably, and Astrid...

"Oh... she felt her chest suddenly tighten. Her face furrowed. What was this? Was she actually _sad_?

"Oh yes, sadness was an odd thing. Because she was not sad that she was not his promised bride. Hiccup was just a friend after all - she knew that she did not like him _that _way. Oh no, no, no. She was sad because she knew that, once they are all grown up, she could never forge a deep relationship with him without _him_ earning the ire of

his future wife, along with the rest of society. She did not really care what they'll say about her, but Hiccup...

"She may be angry with him right now, but the truth was: She _also _cared deeply for him. Hiccup was more than a friend to her. He was her best friend.

"A terrible one, yes... but it wasn't like she had been a dream either. She had not really been completely truthful with him...

"She furiously pushed _that _thought far, far away from her. She wanted to be righteously indignant tonight - Hiccup will get his turn to be angry with her soon enough.

"Oh yes. If he found out that she, too, had been keeping secrets... one that dwarfed even _his _secret... he wouldn't just be angry with her.

"She blinked. No.

"She would never tell him. Her father himself believed that her very life depended upon this secret - _the _Hofferson secret. Not only this, but if Hiccup learned the truth - if he found out - he would not only think that the Hoffersons had all gone mad, he would also never be able to forgive her.

"She suddenly stood up, unable to look him in the eye.

"_Astrid?_"

"She wondered how neither servant nor guest had found them bickering yet...

"_... please say something Astrid._"

"_I... need to think_."

"_You hate me, _he looked up at her sadly.

"_Iâ€¦| _she stopped. No. She did not hate him. Not at all.

"But there was so much to think about: His deceitfulness. Her deceitfulness.

"His confession...

"_Her _deceitfulness.

"_Astrid? _He asked hopefully, also standing up. He took her hand, but she slid it out of his grasp.

"_I - I'm going back to the ball to bid my guests good evening, and then I am going to retire. _She stepped around him, still not looking at him. _Goodnight, Mr Haddock._"

"_Please say that we're still at least friends? _He called to her desperately. She paused in her steps, her head moving as if to turn back to face him, but she silently began to walk away from him again.

"He exhaled heavily and leaned against the window, wondering if he should fly away after all, and prove Astrid right that he only fixed his messes by running away...

"Or, he thought as he looked in the direction where she left, he could prove her wrong. And by proving her wrong, by _staying, _they could perhaps patch up their friendship. They could be comfortable with each other again, ride their dragons together again, and delay the day when they must be separated, when he must forget that they ever shared this summer together, or that he ever liked her...

"_Because this is simply young love,_ he told himself. She was, after all, not only his first close _human _friend. She was also the first girl that he ever liked. He told himself that: Should Astrid refuse to agree to mend their friendship, he would accept her decision. He would force himself to get over her. He would forget her. He would stop liking her. For his father, his family, his duty.

"His future wife.

"But â€" he reasoned with himself â€" he did not have to start forgetting her right now, or even stop liking her.

"Youth is fleeting, and young love even more so. It must be cherished before the bloom of innocence starts to fade, and Hiccup understood this. Even in his youth and inexperience he understood this. And so he decided that he would keep loving her until she wanted nothing more to do with him. He would bury his feelings if it meant saving their relationship, torn to pieces due to his bad judgement. He would not forget her until the time comes when _he must_.

"But... he stopped in his musings. Will that time ever come? Will it ever be easy to deny his feelings for her?

"Does anybody ever really get over their first love?

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

I am so, so sorry for not updating this in a long time. I have no other excuse except I have mostly just been drawing and writing drabbles on tumblr and deviantart. I'm so sorry guys!

The next chapter is written and just needs polishing. Lots of polishing, because I'm gearing up for a major plot point and I want it to be perfect. I'm hoping to have it uploaded within the week. Unless the HTTYD2 Trailer comes out, in which case I'll probably get distracted again _

Anyhow, please let me know what you thought of this chapter!

* * *

><p>Cat Eyed Blunder: Your question will be answered in future chapters, don't worry :)

**Josy daky: **Absolutely! Miss Hofferson knew all this time that

Miss Thorston was cheating by writing to Fishlegs, but she allowed it, for she knew that he would not be able to glean much without her help, because without her tale, his information will not make much sense. She knows the whole story, the others "mere throwaway characters, really " know only but fragments of it.

And thank you so much for holding out on this story! I won't abandon this story until I've finished it. I promise.

****LizzyLory****: Thank you! I hope you liked this chapter too :)

****RoseJustice**** Hehehe! I couldn't stop laughing at that comment about Tuffnut in the Navy!

****Marleysauce: ****Eeeeeee thank you so much! ^_^

****Tyra: ****Ooooooh I can't really say much right now, but your comment really really made me happy, because it means that I did something right as a writer. I won't say why though, but gosh can I just hug you and say thank you again for writing that comment?

14. Arc 2: Courtship - Chapter 13

****THE GHOST OF WARBOROUGH HALL****

"She knew with painful certainty that the opposite of love was not hate, but indifference."

_- Susan Wiggs _

* * *

<p>CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

"That night, Hiccup slept in one of the guest rooms instead of at the servants' quarters. And he slept in the comfort of a bedroom befitting a lord's son every night thereafter, to keep himself as close to her as possible in case she was ready to speak with him again.

"Astrid, meanwhile, often slipped out of the house over the next couple of days to gather her thoughts, often in the company of her Nadder. Her father was not pleased that she often left her guests without saying where she was going. Come to think of it, nobody was pleased at all. Hiccup was the only exception - he was one of the few who were patient with her, for he was the only one who knew why she wanted to be left alone.

"He just hoped that they could share an easy companionship again soon. He hoped she'd see that Harailt was no different to Hiccup " that is, except for the parts where he was the heir of Chisholm House and the entire Haddock estate rather than a lowly blacksmith. But really, other than these... he was still him. He really was not lying when he told her that he was still him despite all this finery.

"It wasn't until the second eve after his confession when she finally felt ready to speak with him, because even though he had not been truthful with her!

"Well, truth be toldâ€¦ she hadn't been truthful with him either.

"She also did not want to stop being friends with him. Like Hiccup, this summer had been one of her happiest. She had made a lifelong friend in her Nadder â€" and she would not even have known that dragons existed without him. She was, at least, grateful for that. She was grateful that Hiccup let her into his world, for allowing her to bond with her dragon and teaching her how to train her andâ€¦

"She wanted - needed - to thank him for that at least. She owed him that much.

"She landed the Nadder near the lake around midnight, on that fateful, second eve after Hiccup's big reveal. She jumped off her saddle with ease and walking briskly towards the manor while her dragon dipped her head down the water for a drink. She walked back with purpose and with her head held high. She was going to talk to him that night, she thought determinedly. She was going to look for him, and talk to him, and they were going to be fineâ€¦

"A sound reached her ears just as she cleared the gardens, and she quickly ducked behind a yew tree, her heart thudding in her chest, afraid that she had been found sneaking about. She could hear hushed voices in the shadows, and she curiously took a peek around the corner to get a better glimpse at who this secret couple wasâ€¦

"â€¦ and nearly gave herself away as she muffled a gasp. She pressed herself closer to the tree, melting into the shadows. She suddenly wished that she had approached the manor from the other side, for the couple was none other than Hiccupâ€¦ and Heather.

"_â€¦ you will not go back on your promise, will you, Mr Haddock?_ Heather had asked.

_"You have my word, Miss Woodville, _was Hiccup's response.

_"_Astrid saw Heather's enchanting smile under the light of the moon. _I am gladâ€¦ and Miss Hofferson?_"

_"_Hiccup suddenly stiffened. _Miss Hofferson? _He asked in a guarded voice, and Astrid was pleased to see Heather hesitate.

_"Please do not take this the wrong way, Mr Haddock, but I have heard tell that you and Miss Hofferson haveâ€¦ well..._She trailed off and dipped her head to one side, anticipating his response to her non-question. When she did not speak again, Hiccup frowned at her impatiently.

"Have what, Miss Woodville?"

_"_She shrugged. _That you and Miss Hoffersson have an understanding of sorts. Forgive me, Mr Haddock, but I have heard rumours that you and Miss Hofferson are â€"_"

_"Are just friends, _Hiccup finished for her sternly. He faltered. _At least, we ****were**** friends. I am no longer sure._"

_"Heather looked up at him from beneath her lashes, studying him, before she gracefully stepped forward and placed a careful hand upon his arm. _May I be so bold as to ask why?_ When he did not respond, she gently pressed on. _Miss Hofferson may not like me - though I do not really know why - but I know that she is a great lady with a very good heart. Whatever you did, I am sure she can forgive you._

_"What makes you think I'm the one that needs forgiving?_He asked defensively.

_"She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow, as if she knew exactly why he and Astrid were fighting. And the look that she gave him at that very moment reminded Hiccup so much of the looks that Astrid used to give him that he began to flush. He turned away. _She is most definitely a very good person,_ he said. _One of the best and most good-hearted people I have ever known, even though she punches a little too hard for my liking,_he added in a mutter before continuing. _Yes, we were friends. Great friends, even. Unfortunately Miss Woodvilleâ€¦ you're right. I was the one who stuffed it up._ His shoulders drooped. _She was a great friend but Iâ€¦ I'm afraid, Miss Woodville, that _**_I _**_have not been a very good friend._

_"Heather smiled sympathetically. _You do not have to tell me what happened if you do not want to. However, I am sure that whatever you did, you did believing it was the best course of action to take. Rarely do we have the gift of foresight, and it is usually too late to amend anything by the time we realise that we have made a bad judgement. What is important is that you take this experience and learn from it, so that you will not make the same mistake again in the future._

_"Hiccup looked at her, stunned at her graceful wisdom, then smiled gratefully at her â€" that same, soft, genuine smile that Astrid loved. _You are very wise, Miss Woodville._He murmured. _Thank you... for speaking with me. For listening. And for everything._He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"In the shadows, Astrid suddenly felt her chest constrict. Heather and Hiccup's friendship seemed so... effortless. So soft, compared to her and Hiccup's relationship, which was all stubbornness and passion and temper...

_"It is nothing,_Heather was saying as she and Hiccup began to walk back to the manor. _I am glad that I could help in some way. I hope that you and Miss Hofferson mend your broken friendship. I really do. And I hopeâ€¦ I hope that, when the time comes, I too can make you happyâ€¦!_

"Hiccup smiled. _Miss Woodville, you already do._

"When they had gone, Astrid began to quickly run back to the side of the manor where her room was and began to climb. She mulled over the conversation that she had just heard. The way that Miss Woodville and Hiccup interacted was slightly oddâ€¦ it seemed like they were already familiar with each other, intimate even. Could it beâ€¦?!

"She slipped into her nightdress in the dark and went to bed without

unbraiding her hair. Her bright eyes shone in the darkness as she stared sightlessly up the canopy of her bed.

"_You will not go back on your promise, will you Mr Haddock? _Heather had asked.

"What promise was she referring to?

"_You have my word, _Hiccup had replied.

"_I hope that I, too, can make you happyâ€|_

"Miss Woodville, you already doâ€|

_"_You already do.

_"_Astrid squeezed her eyes shut. There was suddenly and absolutely no doubt in her mind what this secret couple were referring to.

"There was no doubt in Astrid's mind that Heather Woodville was Hiccup's promised. There was no doubt in Astrid's mind that this was the truth, and that night when he secretly confessed his feelings to herâ€| he did so with the full knowledge that Heather was already to be _his_ adored.

_"_And it was yet another truth that he had failed to tell Astrid.

"She sighed disappointedly. She whispered a secret name in the darkness, hoping that the Ghost would answer her call, for she would very much like to have had someone she trusted to stay and talk with her.

"The ghost did not come.

"She sank ever deeper in her bed, feeling very lonely and friendless. She did not sleep until a pale blue dawn had already broken the horizon. She wished all night that things would just go the way they were before. She wished that everyone would just leave Warborough Hall. And then, with all her heart, she wished that a day will come when there would no longer be any secrets between her and that insufferable boyâ€|

"Unfortunately for Astrid, the guests stayed longer than originally planned. What should have only been a few days of rest turned into one whole week. The gentlemen did not mind: they were able to go hunting with their peers at their leisure, and the park at Warborough Hall had plenty of game. The ladies did not mind either: the extra week provided them the time to catch up and play matchmaker, made all the more pleasurable with both the Jorgenson _and_ the Haddock heirs in residence.

"Astrid, however, _minded. _She minded it a lot. Especially since _both_ the Jorgenson and the Haddock heirs were in residence. And, most curiously, she also found it unbearable that Miss Heather Woodville had started to take over Hiccup's full attention now that she was ignoring him.

"Miss Woodville. Oh, thatâ€| that clever fox of a woman! Astrid began

to like her even less. Miss Woodville was just soâ€¦ well, she just seemed to take over Hiccup's attention and affection so ****effortlessly****, so ****artfully****, and â€" dare I say it â€" so ****stealthily****. She was so disarmingly charming that even Astrid could see why anyone would take to liking her almost as soon as they start speaking to her. Heather was just so ****_beguiling_**** andâ€¦

"Astrid blinked, then looked away from the sight of Heather and Hiccup murmuring to each other by the window that fateful morning on the fifth day after his confession (oh yes, Miss Thorston, she had been keeping track of the days). Astrid frowned to herself. Why did she have to feel soâ€¦ jealous? Heather was absolutely right: Astrid had no reason why she would despise her, besides the fact that Heather was the perfect, shining example of the lady that Astrid was supposed to be, but was not.

"Besides, Astrid thought, she was meant to be feeling furious, not jealousâ€¦ and why did she care that he was talking to her? He was probably just being polite, being a good little gentlemanâ€¦

"Or a good little suitor.

"She could hear the nasal tone of his voice from where she was sitting, and she could see the white flash of Heather's smile from the corner of her eyesâ€¦

"Did Astrid and Hiccup's friendship look that natural? She asked herself. Did they look as in sync with each other as Hiccup and Heather? Did they interact with each other as easily and as effortlessly? She snorted when she realised that the answer was no. She remembered throwing him against a tree the first time they met. And even after that, their friendship was - even at the best of times - tumultuous. He was far too stubborn and she was far too hot-headed.

"She turned her attention back to the circle of women who she was sitting with, trying desperately to follow the conversation in order to ignore Hiccup and Heather, fighting down the irrational feeling that the lady she least liked was becoming fast friends with the man who she most liked, and who had, incidentally, also just stated his deepest feelings for her...

"No, stop it! She fumed to herself.

"Irrational. She was being so irrational!

"Astrid was so distracted by her thoughts that she nearly jumped out of her skin when Snotlout suddenly greeted her from behind.

"Mr Jorgenson! Astrid exclaimed, and to her annoyance, the older ladies she was seated with began to teeter and smile secretively at each other.

"May we speak? Snotlout said, glancing at the other women. Privately, if we may, he added in a serious tone that Astrid had never heard him use before. Snotlout was usually a Jorgenson through and through â€" loud, obnoxious, aggressive, boastful. This serious boy before Astrid was so unusual that she acquiesced, intrigued by what he might have to say to her privately, as long as it was not a

proposal. She excused herself from the table and took his arm and, as they walked past the window, she saw Hiccup follow them with his eyes. She felt a smug wave wash over her as he looked at them with such intensity that she could feel his gaze boring right through her neck.

"Hiccup, it seemed, could be green-eyed in more than one sense of the word. Perhaps she could take a leaf out of Heather's book and use her charms to her advantage, for it seemed like there was more than one way to punish a Haddock. She pressed herself closer to Mr Jorgenson, and felt an even greater satisfaction when she heard Hiccup make a loud, strangled cry.

"Heather, meanwhile, was futilely trying to get Hiccup's undivided attention once more.

"Snotlout led her to the gazebo in nervous silence. He tried numerous times to engage in small talk on the way there, yet failing each time. When they were finally seated at the table, Astrid thought it best that frank rather than flowery language would help dissipate the anxious air around him. And so she punched him in the arm once they were seated, and he gazed back at her as if she had grown three heads.

"_Missâ€| Miss Hofferson!_"

"_Come now, Snotlout. What is it that you want?_"

"His mouth hung open for a moment in shock at being addressed by his first name, and then he stammered at her. "_Miss Hofferson! You must refer to me as Mr Jorgens â€"_"

"She punched him again. "_We're alone, Snotlout. Spit it out._"

"He was stunned at her answer for a second, before he grinned devilishly at her. "_I knew there was a reason why I liked you, Astrid._"

"Astrid grinned back at him before she sat back in her chair. "_So, you wanted to tell me something?_"

"Snotlout fidgeted for a moment. "_Y-yes. It'sâ€| about you and Hiccup._"

"And just like that, Astrid's walls were immediately up. "_And what about Hiccup and me?_"

"_I know._"

"_Know what?_"

"_I know, alright? I know what you two are doing._"

"Astrid flushed. "_We are not doing anything-_"

"_Dragon training._"

"Astrid choked back the rest of her sentence. She warily looked at him. "_I beg your pardon?_"

"_Dragon training! _Snotlout repeated impatiently. _With giant, dragonny dragons. Hiccup rides a Night Fury, and you've bonded with aâ€¦| what was it again? A Gronkle?_"

"A _Nadder, _she corrected him automatically and without thinking, then quietly cursed when she realised that she had just outed herself. Thankfully, Snotlout did not seem to care.

"_A Nadder then, _Snotlout leaned back in his seat and grinned at her. _Congratulations. They're very good dragons. Did you know that they have one of the hottest firepower around?_"

"Astrid pressed her lips together in a straight line. There was no way getting out of this one, it seemed. _Where are you going with this, Snotlout?_" She asked warily.

"_Hmmâ€¦| maybe I just wanted you to know that I already know your secret._"

"_But it's not a secret, _Astrid bluffed.

"_Oh, _he laughed boisterously. _I am quite sure that it is, Astrid. I of all people would know that this is something you'd want as few people to ****know**** as possible. _He leaned forward with a challenge behind his eyes. _Unless you'd like me to boast it to your guests?_"

"_I'd like to see you try, _Astrid hissed at him and leaned forward as well, calling his bluff. _Besides, what would you know?_"

"_As a matter of fact, I'd know a lot about these things. I'd know, because I'm aâ€¦|_"

"_Mr Jorgenson! Miss Hofferson! Pleasant day to be outside, don't you agree?_"

"Astrid and Snotlout jumped apart and whipped around to find Hiccup striding in their direction. Her face reddened when she realised how close Snotlout's and her face had been, and Hiccup...

"Hiccup.

"Hiccup with his thunderous eyes and false grin.

"Hiccup, who must have misunderstood Astrid's and Snotlout's closeness forâ€¦|

"Oh dear God.

"_Mr Haddock! _Astrid gasped

"_Miss Hofferson, _Hiccup bent his head to her stiffly. _May we speak alone?_"

"_No, _Snotlout interjected, _I believe Miss Hofferson and I were actually speaking ****privately****._"

"_Snotlout, _Astrid began, but at the mention of Mr Jorgenson's name Hiccup interrupted her venomously.

"_Oh, so you two are so familiar now as to call each other by your first names, aren't you?_"

"_Oh be quiet Hiccup! _Astrid barked, and Snotlout laughed.

"_I don't believe thisâ€¦| did you just call my cousin by his nickname?_"

"Astrid stared at him, shocked. _Cousins? Y- you're cousins?_"

"_Distant, _they simultaneously responded. Snotlout stood up, and Hiccup squared his shoulders to him. The larger Jorgenson boy eyed him before he laughed, throwing his head back to look at Astrid.

"_I can't believe you're friends with hiccupy Hiccup, Astrid._"

"Astrid stiffened, but before she could respond, Hiccup cheerily replied with a hint of smugness in his voice. _Actually Snotlout, if you must know, Astrid and I are very great friends!_"

"_Hiccup, _Astrid warned.

"_Oh, of course, how could I forget?_ Snotlout sniggered._ You're ****indeed**** friends with Miss Hofferson. __In fact, Gobber told us just how ****close ****you two have __become._"

"Hiccup and Astrid froze, then looked at each other. _Gobber?! _They exclaimed.

"_Why_ _yes! _Snotlout chuckled._ You know that he would never withhold any information from my fatherâ€¦| our families are allies after allâ€¦| and he's such a peabrain that it wasn't hard to get him to start talking once the wine had loosened his tongue._"

"Hiccup seethed.

_"Snotlout, y__ou elephant-nostrilled, bottom-brained- _Astrid began to say shrilly, but Hiccup drowned her out.

"_So you know Astrid's training a dragon and I'm helping her out. Big deal. What are you going to do about it? You can't blab on us â€œ"_"

"_- I know, _Snotlout scoffed.

" â€œ" _and you can't stop Astrid from training her dragon, now that she's bonded with the Nadder._"

"_I know that too! _Snotlout's eyes twitched in annoyance. _Which was why I wanted to talk to Astrid alone. I need to tell her my proposition, so why don't you just go away and suck rocks, Hiccup._"

"_A proposition? _Astrid scornfully interjected before she turned and made to walk away. _No thank you._"

"_No, wait! Astrid, hear me out!_ Snotlout cried. _Wait wait wait! I

am proposing to be your teacher!_

"Hiccup suddenly laughed uncontrollably, and Astrid shot him a glare.

"_Teach her what, 'Lout? _He asked between his bursts of laughter. Mr Jorgensen gave him a boastful grin.

"_Why,_ _all things related to dragons of course!_

"_Are you serious? _Astrid asked incredulously at the same time as Hiccup said: _That role has already been taken, Snotlout. By me._

"Snotlout ignored him and addressed Astrid directly. _I have a lot more to teach you than this runt over here. Everyone knows that the Jorgensons have a way with dragons that the Haddocks simply do not have._

"_What,_ Hiccup snorted,_ Yell commands at your dragons 'til they go deaf?_

"_We do not shout at our dragons! We bond with our dragons through rough-play, just like the first dragon-riders did all those centuries ago._

"_Stop it you two! _Astrid interrupted, _You're both just acting like children now. _

"Hiccup ignored her and pressed on.

"_The way to bond with them is through slow and steady friendship, Snotlout. Besides, everyone knows that the Haddocks were the first to ride dragons._

"Mr Jorgenson barked out a laughter. _That's a myth, Hiccup, nothing more. Get your head out of the clouds and let's deal with the facts here._

"_It's not a myth, Snotlout, it's history. And you want facts? Alright! Fact is, Snotlout, I've always been the better dragon trainer than you._

"_Hiccup, just let it go, _Astrid hissed.

"_Not true! _Snotlout exclaimed. _I have trained dozens of Monstrous Nightmares and everybody knows that they are the hardest, most stubborn dragons to train._

"_Snotlout, _Astrid turned to him. _
>

"_Except the Jorgensons have always just followed ****our**** lead. Your family has always ever been second in command to the Haddock clan._

"_Hiccup! _Astrid reprimanded him, but there was something in this argument â€" an age-old rivalry that seemed to go back a dozen lifetimes â€" that not even she could stop. She rolled her eyes up to the heavens, praying for calm and patience.

"_I will prove to you that I am the better dragon trainer, _Snotlout growled.

"_How? By opening your big mouth?_"

"_We will race!_"

"_Your Nightmare against my Night Fury? _Hiccup snorted.

"_Yeah. Hookfang versus Toothless. A race to test speed and endurance._"

"_You're joking right? _Hiccup laughed incredulously._ I don't even have to race you to know that I'll win!_"

"_Just stop it, you two! _Astrid tried one last time, but was ignored once again.

"_You can't win, because I'll make sure that ****I**** win, _Snotlout ground out. _You know why? Because the winner gets Astrid._"

"_I beg your pardon! _Astrid bellowed, offended.

"But to Astrid's horror, Hiccup "blinded by a smug desperation to win against his rival and prove to Astrid that he was the better boy of the two "replied with: _You have a deal!_"

"Their words sealed their fates. She turned to Snotlout and swung a capable fist to his nose, effectively breaking it. He roared in pain, and before Hiccup could react, he found himself on the ground as well, his nose spurting blood.

"_That was for acting like children, ignoring me, and thinking that I was ****yours ****to win! _Astrid shouted. She then brought Hiccup back on his feet, only to punch him once more in the stomach. He doubled over and fell to the ground.

"_And ****that ****was for everything else!_"

"She surveyed the pair of boys moaning in pain before she turned on her heel" and paused in horrified silence when she came face to face with a crowd of spectators comprising of servants and guests who had all rushed outside to see what all the commotion was about.

"And they had also unfortunately just witnessed what she had done"

"She gasped. Oh, dear god! What had she done?"

"Most of the ladies had their mouths covered in shock, though some were gleefully whispering to each other. Astrid looked back at the two boys in alarm, and saw Hiccup glaring back at her defiantly, his eyes betraying a mix of anger, embarrassment, and regret.

"_What" did you" punch me for? _"

"_Think hard, Hiccup. Think very, very hard, _she hissed. She paused, then added: _Besides, I know about Heather. _She took in his shocked look, then gallantly lifted her chin and walked back to the house in

dignified silence.

"The crowd parted for her as if she was the queen herself... or a madwoman.

"_Ast-Astrid! _Hiccup wheezed, and a few of the guests gasped at his familiarity. He bit his lip at the mistake. _Astridâ€| _he repeated mournfully.

"_Haddock, _Snotlout coughed next to him.

"_What? _Hiccup snarled.

"_The raceâ€| is stillâ€| on._

"Hiccup rolled his eyes. _No Snotlout, _he muttered as he tried to get back on his feet. _No it's not._

"_The guests all milled about the two boys, asking them what happened, checking that they were both alright, gossiping about how horrible Lord Hofferson's daughter was. Hiccup wanted to shoot down all of their comments, but knew that by doing so he would only be making matters worse for both himself _and _Astrid.

"And Astridâ€|

"Oh what has he done?

"He desperately tried to push through the guests and ran after her, his nose bleeding freely and his stomach throbbing painfully. But the last he ever saw of her was the flicker of her blue dress before the house seemed to swallow her up."

* * *

><p>Miss Hofferson paused and took a shaky breath, though she was smiling faintly.<p>

"Would youâ€| would you like to take a break?" I asked.

"No Miss Thorston," she replied. "But I would be grateful for some water."

"Of course," I said and stood up. I poured her a glass, helping her drink it before taking my seat once more.

"How did you manage to get out of that rut?" I asked when she did not immediately take up her story again.

"I didn't," she crossed her arms. "Well, not really. The Ghost helped out a little, but I didn't escape the wrath of my father. You see, after that whole debacle, Astrid slipped out the back door, saddled her Nadder, and flew away. She flew far and fast, across land and water, to the south. Away from here, far awayâ€| towards her sanctuary."

"You ran away?"

Miss Hofferson winced. "After a fashion. You understand that it was not because she hit Mr Haddock and Mr Jorgenson in front of everybody

that Astrid decided to run away. She was more than willing to take the consequences for her actions. What she could not face was the aftermath of his, that betrayal from the boy she thought was her friend, her teacher, and her companionâ€|

"It was this that hurt more than finding out he was that same, irritating, slippery Haddock as that Haddock boy in her youth. And I suppose she was, in this sense, also a coward. Just like Hiccup. She was running away from the issues, because she was frightened. She was frightened of the monster that Hiccup seemed to keep bringing out of her. She was frightened of the harm that she might doâ€| to him. To her. To her heartâ€|

"She could not face him â€" she did not know how. She was frightened of him, and of herself. But we know that one cannot run away forever â€" not yet, not now, not ever. And so, when night finally fell, I flew back to Warborough Hall, steeling myself from my father's anger that was sure to come.

"It wasn't until past midnight on the same day when I finally slipped back into Warborough Hall. My father was waiting for me in my room, as if he already knew that ****I ****was coming. He did not shout at me, but I could feel his anger radiating from his stony face, and for the first time in my life I was afraidâ€|

"We spoke â€" or rather, he spoke â€" while I tried to explain. Get him to see it from my perspective. However, in the end, he gave his verdict: I was to apologise to both Hiccup and Snotlout, and then I was going to apologise to the families. I was going to be in my absolute best behaviour. I was going to clean up this mess.

"And then I was to go to London, and learn to be the proper lady that I should already have been. I was sixteen, I was no longer a child. I was to be eighteen and presented to society in two years. I could no longer act carefree.

"It was not fair, but then again, I had made my decision to return, and so I must also be prepared to suffer the consequences.

"So I took it all in my stride, took the judgement and punishment, but deep down I felt angry and resentful. It was unfair â€" why must I be disciplined for this? I did not have to take this punishment! But at the same timeâ€| my father was right. I made this decision â€" and it was a decision made because of love â€" and so it was I who must play this charade, and take the bullet for one of the deepest and most ancient kinds of love known to mankind.

"I took it in my stride. I took it all, swallowed it all. I made sure I let the Ghost know though. I made sure she knew about all the things that I was suffering. I told her everything, because I never kept any secrets from her. We never kept secrets from each other. But in a way, I guess I also told her so that she, too, could feel the pain and anger that I felt. It was a little cruel of me to do so, but at the time I felt wholly justified.

"I cried after my father left my room. But when I had cried my fill, I clad myself once more with indifference and iron will. I tiptoed out into the hallway. I kept to the shadows, went through secret walls and doorways, familiarising myself with this place once more,

and when I finally returned to my room, I saw _him._

"He was sitting outside Astrid's bedroom, his head leaning against the door, his mouth hanging open as he lightly snored. I saw that his nose did not seem broken at all, though there were the remnants of dried blood still in his nostrils.

"He looked so peaceful there.

"I imagined that he must have knocked at her door and, mistaking the silence of an empty room as the silence of a very angry woman, he must have spoken through the door, hoping that she was listening. He must have tried to explain things to her, must have accepted his mistakes, asked for her pardonâ€¦ perhaps he even spoke to the door of his feelings, though I was not there to hear it.

"_Boys are such silly creatures, _I thought, and it was then when I vowed to myself that I would never be so foolish as to give my heart away to a man.

"He awakened the moment my shadow fell upon him and he slowly blinked his eyes open. When he did so, I stepped back into the darkness and silently waited for him to realise that I was there. And when he did, he nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise.

"_What theâ€¦ Astrid! Good God I- you- I nearly had a heart attack!_

"_Go home, _I said coldly, and even in the dark I could tell that he had blanched at my words.

"_Astrid, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'mâ€¦_

"_You're sorry? _I asked incredulously. Liar! _If you're really sorry, then why do we feel like we still don't know everything about you?_ _Why do I feel like I'm still going to find out something about you by accident, or when it's already too late, or something about you that would actually kill me? How many times must you say sorry? How many times do we have to forgive you?_

"_We?_

"_I clenched my fists. _Yes. We. The Hoffersons._

"He bit his lip, and then sighed. _I'mâ€¦ sorry Astrid. _

"_No. _Unfortunately, I could not accept his apology. Not me.

"_Astridâ€¦ _His voice cracked. _Pleaseâ€¦ Iâ€¦ _His eyes were wild and pleading, and I nearly took pity.

"Nearly. But I could not accept his apology. Not me. Not
me.

"_Go home, _I repeated, and I turned my back and dissolved back to the shadows, through the walls, through the very manor itself.

"And if he said anything more, if he had followed me, I cannot know.

"The following day, I did everything that my father told me. I apologised to both boys in front of everybody with a cold sincerity that seemed to terrify Hiccup more than anything. I apologised to their fathers, to the guests, to everyone under the sun.

"And then our guests left with more gossip than they could hold in their mouths.

"Hiccup stayed here a few more weeks, once more as a blacksmith, though he now slept in one of our guestrooms as the servants no longer knew how to act around him. He tried to talk to me during the first week when the house was ours once again, but soon my stony civility and absolute distrust discouraged him from trying to patch up our friendship. I needed him out of my hair, anyway. For if he knew that my dragon wasâ€|

"No, he must not know. I had to be careful: _I could not allow him to know_.

"He never really gave up â€" he still cast hopeful glances in my direction. However, he no longer knew how to act around this new Astrid. It was as if she was a different lady, and it hurt him to know that he was the cause of this change.

"Gobber and Hiccup only stayed back the extra few weeks to wrap up their blacksmithing duties. And when their projects were done, they packed up and left. I was not at home the day they left â€" I was out flying, enjoying my last few moments of freedom before I was to be carted off to London. But upon my return, as I was climbing up the wall to the bedroom, I found a letter wedged upon the windowsill. It was a letter from Hiccup, a letter of farewell, of apology, of hope and friendship and everything else that he could not voice to me, for I would not let him.

"Hanging from the window handle was a clockwork toy in the shape of a dragon that he had fashioned himself - no doubt hastily forged just before the fires of the smithy were completely extinguished, though the genius of his mind still shone in this simple piece. _A parting gift, _he wrote, _For the friend who will always be in my heart, though I may no longer be in hers. _

"He left the letter and the gift there, and then he left Warborough Hall.

"I would not see him again until I was eighteen."

* * *

><p>I blinked, trying to get my bearings once more when I realised that Miss Hofferson had stopped speaking. When my eyes finally focused, I saw that Miss Hofferson was holding out a tiny, bronze object to me. I reached out and took it.<p>

"His parting gift," Miss Hofferson smiled. "It is yours now."

I turned the toy in my hands. It was a dragon alright, with a tiny gear near the top that, when winded, allowed the wings to swiftly flap up and down, causing the toy to jump around in my palms. It was cute. I grinned and raised my eyes back up to gaze at Miss Hofferson,

turning the object over in my palms.

"What kind of dragon is it?"

"That, my dear, is a nanodragon."

I hummed as I ran a thumb over the delicately beaten metal, and then remembered something that did not quite make sense in her storyâ€|

She still ignored Hiccup after the guests left, but she made it clear that it was not because she was still angry with him, but because she distrusted him. She wanted him out of her hair because she didn't want him to find out that her dragon wasâ€|

Was what? That her dragon was what? I furrowed my eyebrows at her.

"What was wrong with your dragon, Miss Hofferson?" I ventured.

Astrid grimaced, immediately catching on to the part in her story that I was referring to. "Nothing."

I persevered. "You said you didn't want him finding out that you dragon wasâ€| something. What was it that you did not want Hiccup to find out?"

She picked at her quilt, clearly uncomfortable at my question. "My father," she murmured, "He knew about the Nadder, mentioned it during our talk the night I returned home. He knew all about the dragons, my dragon, _our_ dragons, _our_ training sessions."

"How? How did he know?"

She shrugged. "To be perfectly honest, Miss Thorston: I do not know. Perhaps Gobber told him. Perhaps Hiccup did. Or perhaps his infamous Hofferson pragmatism finally dissolved, andâ€| perhaps, my father finally learned to see dragons. He, after all, had a daughter who had bonded with a Nadder. He had lived all his adult life in a household that was bursting with imagination and ghosts. Although at his age heâ€| well, perhaps he also saw the implications of freely admitting to others that he had the ability to see dragons. Whatever the reason, the fact remained that he _knew_. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you how."

I frowned. "So why didn't you just tell Hiccup that your father knew?" I asked. "Seems pretty harmless â€" Hiccup already sees dragons after all."

She merely shrugged. "I believe that is enough for today," she said evasively and dismissed me by ringing her bell. "We shall continue again tomorrow. Good evening, Miss Thorston."

Evening? I glanced outside the window and was surprised to see that night had indeed already completely fallen. I had not even realised that the golden afternoon had already given way to the inky blackness of the early winter's eve!

Lisa entered the room and smiled at me once more, which I returned

this time round. Not wanting to cause another scene, I took my leave and slowly walked back to my bedroom. Once there, I dumped my belongings on my writing table and looked out of my window as I absentmindedly fiddled with the puzzle.

There was something in the recent turn of events that didn't add up. And I knew that the answer was so frustratingly and tantalisingly close that I only had to reach out and I would be able to _grasp_ it.

The story seemed straightforward enough, sure. I mean, all I had to do was follow her voice blindly, follow the story blindly, and I would reach the end of her maze without a problem. I had absolutely no doubt that she would tell me the story of Astrid Hofferson to the very end. But I also knew Miss Hofferson enough to know that she was leading me through a labyrinth more complicated than I originally imagined, and that I alone must find the red string that she had left behind for me if I wanted to see the truth behind _the truth_.

Miss Hofferson was all smoke and mirrors.

So what was it that I could not see? What was it that I could not comprehend?

_ "They are here, as star and sky," _the ghostly mantra rang through my head once more.

Who? Who was the red string that I kept failing to follow?

I kept staring with unseeing eyes outside as the fog descended upon the grounds. I fancied seeing two, long, graceful necks bobbing in and out of the fogâ€¦ sometimes solid, sometimes not. I fancied seeing one of the necks dipping out of sight, while the other one stretched up to look at the sky.

I opened my window and leaned out, squinting in the darkness. "Zippleback," I tentatively whispered. The two heads seemed to stop, seemed to turn their heads towards me, seemed to begin walking in my directionâ€¦

And then the fog swallowed them up from sight, and though I kept staring for another quarter of hour, they did not emerge again from the swirling curtain upon the grounds.

They had turned to fog once more.

* * *

><p>AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Oh dear! What has Astrid done? D:

As always, your reviews give me the greatest joy (and really do keep me in line with regards to frequency and quality of the chapters)! There have been a few readers who have already figured out the answers to some of these questions, and to you guys I only have two words: high five!

PS: I'm currently trying to flesh out another fic - it'll be shorter than this one, but it's something that's been begging to be written

ever since I heard this particular song by Kyla la Grange. It'll be AU, with blood and war and fangs and guns and gadgets and, of course, lots of leather...

* * *

><p>Ferdoos: Thanks :) sorry, no Hiccstrid in this chapter either.

****InfinitiumAce****:** **Oh gosh, thank you so much! I feel so honoured that you think so highly of this fic *melts* I don't know if my fic is good enough, but I agree that there are so many fics out there that need to be published into full-blown novels. A couple in HTTYD easily come to mindâ€|

And yes, I'm also hoping that certain scenes won't pan out to clichÃ© territory. I'm hoping that I don't stuff up the unravelling of all the mysteries, although I can't really promise that certain events won't be predictable, especially if you already know the answer to the questions by that time!

****FuyukoYoshidaKat**:** All very good questions! Most will be answered in due time, although I did add the "zippleback in the fog" scene at the end of this chapter to sort of answer one of your questions ;)

****Cat Eyed Blunder:**** Haha thanks :) sorry about the wait!

* * *

><p>NEXT CHAPTER: In which Hiccup's character returns to the story once more. Well, this arc is titled "Courtship" for a reason :)

End
file.